

*Write-Ups From  
The Lawrence Heights Community  
Quality Of Life Project*

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## Introduction

This report contains the information provided by community members, service providers, and elected representatives as part of the *Lawrence Heights Community Quality of Life Project*. Eighteen group discussions were held which involved 146 community members. Most of these community members resided within Lawrence Heights, but we also spoke with persons who live in the surrounding areas. Seven groups involved youth, three were with seniors, and eight involved adults. These adult groups included seven groups with New Canadians.

Twelve service providers were individually interviewed. Six elected representatives also were interviewed. All these discussions and interviews were taped. Project staff used these tapes and notes from the discussions and interviews to provide the content for the write-ups.

Before finalizing these write-ups, they were provided to the participants and interviewees in order to verify their accuracy. This process allows us to be confident that we have captured the views of those we interviewed.

The first series of write-ups are from the group discussions with community members. First we provide the write-ups from youth, followed by those from seniors, and adults. We then provide the results from the interviews with service providers. We conclude with the interviews carried out with the elected representatives of Lawrence Heights. These include both the political representatives as well as the public and separate school trustees.

The content of the community members' narratives contain their responses to questions about the aspects of Lawrence Heights that support quality of life and those that do not. We also found out how people cope and manage, and the services and programs they would like to see.

The information from the service providers and representatives is similar in that we asked about the positive and negative aspects of life in Lawrence Heights. We also inquired into the mandate and activities of these individuals and their organizations and how they attempt to improve the quality of life of community members.

For an analysis and interpretation of these findings, please see the reports: *The People, Places, and Priorities of Lawrence Heights: Findings from the Community Quality of Life Project* and *The People, Places, and Priorities of Lawrence Heights: Conclusions from the Community Quality of Life Project*.

# Findings from Community

## Members

### Youth

**Community Centre Youth Group**  
**January, 1997**  
**4 participants**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Belonging**

Participants agreed that most people know each other in the Lawrence Heights community. "This community has a lot of benefits to the people who live around here, not money-wise . . . there's love for people in your community, it's like a family . . . everybody has to come together, not only on certain topics like if something goes bad in the community, at all times the community should come together as one people and speak our voice and hear other people's opinions."

**Community Health Centre (CHC)**

The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre. "has been here for a lot of people, of different cultures." The participants liked their youth group, where they discuss issues such as violence, sex and relationships. The CHC's comfortable atmosphere, the Spanish-speaking group and seniors group were also mentioned. One participant indicated that "this is a bit more than a health centre, because you get access to things, like a computer." The CHC was identified as a place where people could go if they had a problem (e.g., teen pregnancy) or needed someone to talk to.

**Community Recreation Centre: Activities**

The community recreation centre is a place where people can get together. It is "open to all people, not just a certain stamp of people -- so that's what people would see it as, the community centre's only for black people, they only go there and play basketball, or it's only for Caucasian people, they only go there and play hockey." "It's fun there." There are after-school programs for kids. Youth do sports and "recreational stuff," such as basketball and ping-pong.

**Parks**

Participants liked having a nearby park where they could go and be with their friends, play basketball, etc.

**School as a Place for Extracurricular Activities**

When speaking of school, participants appeared to most enjoy the extracurricular activities. The participants were involved in a number of activities including sports such as basketball, volleyball and track. One participant was involved in a school leadership committee: "I try to involve myself a lot, that makes me happy . . . I do the leadership committee because I can help people, hear what they want." Another volunteered helping teachers as a secretary and taking score at volleyball games. School was also the place where the participants socialized and saw their friends.

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Community Health Centre: Staff**

Participants had both good and bad things to say about “the people who work here.” Some of the staff “really try and get involved with you. I believe they’re genuine, not here today, gone tomorrow, they’ll call and check up.” It was felt that only certain staff did outreach and mingled with the community. Others were seen to be “chatting on the phone, working in fancy offices.”

### **Community Involvement**

One participant felt that sometimes community members do not focus on the good things in the community, and cited the example of parents not attending parents night at school. Additionally, it was felt that some community members do not use the opportunities presented to them to get involved; they may not have time, may feel it’s not important, or that they don’t see eye to eye with others who are addressing the problems.

It was felt that people used to help one another more and be more involved in community issues, such as parking and rent. However, more people are beginning to come out to tenants meetings. “I see the community getting together more now than in the past two years.” One participant “would like to see people who live here actually run things.”

### **Crime and Safety**

Participants indicated that they felt safe in their neighbourhood because they “know everybody.” Participants did not feel there were many break-ins or vandalism in the area. However, one person indicated that a card key system to gain access to her building was “still not working and anybody can go in.” In the past, people used to come in and do whatever they wanted, drugs for example.

### **“The Jungle” - Differing Interpretations**

Following up on one participant’s comment that “the jungle’s poorly lit”, the question was asked: “Why is the community called the jungle?”. One participant felt this was pet name for the neighbourhood and did not think it had a bad connotation. Jungle also refers to the area being “like a maze.” Participants were used to calling the area “the jungle” as this has “been it’s name for years.” Participants noted that the media emphasizes the name “the jungle” and focuses on things that are negative in the area, for example, a shooting that took place a year and a half ago.

### **The Local Mall**

The group liked having the mall “in your backyard.” “If someone’s sick you could come here [the CHC] or to the Shoppers Drug Mart, to the walk-in clinic, it’s easy access.” Although the mall has the essentials, it was agreed that it could have more variety. They noted that there is lots of empty space there and frequent changeover of stores. The group agreed that “they should ask us what [stores] we want.”

### **School as a Place for Learning**

Participants' feelings towards their schools varied. One participant felt that school was "pretty good," that there were lots of teachers and they were supportive. Another participant also felt that school was "pretty good," but that certain people do not try to communicate with the students, they just give orders. This person liked the staff advocate program. Another participant commented: "My school is full of crap." This participant did not feel that there was anyone to really talk to at school (i.e., principals, teachers or guidance counsellors); most of the staff were viewed as uncaring and not encouraging the students to achieve. The participant did not feel it was necessary to have staff walking around the school with walkie-talkies.

### **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

#### **Community Recreation Centre: Staff**

The participants discussed that many of the community centre's staff are related, and that there is little opportunity for others to get a job there. Participants agreed that the staff "are your friends but sometimes they don't act like it." One of the staff who they liked at the centre had their job terminated. Someone commented: "Have to fix some of the head people."

#### **Ontario Housing: Service and Maintenance**

Participants discussed their dissatisfaction with Ontario Housing at some length. They cited a number of examples of inadequate service and maintenance. They mentioned that snow on the streets and sidewalks is not shovelled, while at the same time residents are sent letters stating they will be fined if they do not shovel in front of their homes. Participants agreed that homes were often cold in winter and warm in summer; one participant did not have hot water for a week; people have to fix things themselves, or damage things further in order to get them fixed or replaced. Service responses to these problems is seen as poor: "They say they're coming in half an hour, but then they don't come, say they're busy." "Don't do a good job with repairs."

The group commented that the rents are high and the homes are not well-kept: "Why is rent most of a pay cheque?" "The homes are rundown." "Ontario housing houses are disgusting."

#### **Public Transportation**

It was felt that the Lawrence Heights community had fewer bus stops than other neighbourhoods, and that there was a greater distance between stops. Participants also noted that hours of service are being reduced, for example, bus service stops at 7 p.m. on Sundays. One person also cited an experience of there being no TTC staff person being on duty at the subway, and having to walk up to the next subway station when their token would not be accepted.

### **D. Desired Resources and Services**

The group agreed that the community needs more, and more diverse, programs for youth. Young people need community programs and resources that support and encourage them to develop their talents and skills. There is a need to "find a lot more things that kids are interested in that will help them to become what they want in the future . . . there's a lot of talented people in this community, people who can sing, dance, draw, do public speaking, a lot of people who can help

people, counsel people, facilitate, a whole bunch of stuff.”

Also mentioned was a lack of mailboxes and pay phones in the community, and that the neighbourhood is poorly lit.

**Grade Six Students Group**  
**March, 1997**  
**10 participants**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Leisure and Recreation Activities**

Most of the group participated in some form of organized sport or recreational activity, including swimming and skating. One girl attended a girls group and scouts once a week. Another enjoyed going to the Jewish Community Centre, and would like to see more girls playing basketball there. Two of the participants were members of the Columbus Centre, where there is a swimming pool and a soccer league, among other things. Some of the boys in the group played floor hockey after school. Some of the students also spend time at Yorkdale Mall, where they go shopping and see movies with their friends

**Libraries**

The students reported that they use public libraries, both for their school work and to socialize with friends. Libraries were used “all the time . . . but I don’t always use it for reading, I use it to hang out with my friends.”

**B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

**The Lawrence Heights Neighbourhood**

When speaking of neighbourhoods, the group quickly differentiated between the area known as “the jungle” and the neighbourhoods that surround it. Some of the students in the group lived in “the jungle,” while others lived nearby. “I live very close to there and during the summer it’s not that great.” A few of the students spoke of some of the negative things that go on in “the jungle,” such as drug use, but felt this was not a reflection of community members, and moreover, that the community as a whole should not be blamed for the actions of a few. “Sometimes people say the jungle is a very bad place, but I don’t think it’s the people who live there, I think it’s the people who come there . . . they [visitors, friends, cousins] may smoke, they may spoke pot, and smoke it in front of the children . . . making it not a very great environment.”

**Neighbourliness**

Feelings about neighbours were mixed. Some participants indicated they had good neighbours, “The neighbourhood that I live in is a friendly neighbourhood and the people are nice to each other, and if you need help they will help you,” while others noted some disturbing incidents, such as screaming at night, and felt that some of their neighbours had problems they needed help with. The group agreed that “You can’t find a community where it’s all good.”

**Parkland and Outdoor Space**

The benefits and drawbacks of having parks nearby one’s home were discussed. In some ways, the group appreciated parks, especially those they consider interesting, with good equipment and things to do. Flemington Park is an example. However, there were many negative features to parks as well. For

example, they mentioned that people do graffiti and use the parks to smoke. Because of this, it was felt that “Nobody goes there [to play] anymore.” However, one participant felt that “graffiti is art” and that there should be places where it can be done freely. Noise and teenagers hanging out in parks were also concerns. “There’s a park close to my house and in the summer it’s not a very nice place because at night especially, there’s people that rent out these big, big speakers, and my house is literally shaking . . . this is at twelve o’clock at night, and sometimes the police don’t like coming.”

Referring to a different park, someone commented that “Teenagers go there and do drugs,” and that she has seen bras and condoms at the park. Some of the group agreed that “There did not used to be as many bad things going on in the parks.” Some felt that parks should be improved, by adding more climbers and monkey bars, for example. One person thought money could be better spent on schools and hospitals.

### **School**

The group was generally positive about their school. They had heard some negative reports about middle (junior high) school, such as overcrowding and students growing marijuana in their lockers.

### **Teenagers and Peer Pressure**

The group recognized the influence of “peer pressure” and how it contributes to teens engaging in behaviours thought to be “cool.” One girl indicated that she herself felt peer pressure in certain situations. About teenagers, one person commented: “What do you expect from a teenager? They’re teenagers . . . when they have a chance to party at their house, I think most of us here, when we get to a certain age, like fourteen, fifteen, and the parents leave them home, I think most of us would invite friends.” Others disagreed and also felt they would have more respect for their neighbours and not rent boom boxes and play very loud music. “Most of us wouldn’t do that, there are a lot of teenagers, and we only think of the bad ones, but there are a lot of good ones.”

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Crime and Safety**

Crime and safety were a concern for many of the participants. One girl commented: “I don’t feel comfortable, especially at night, because there’s really scary people.” Others were aware of dangerous situations that have occurred where they live. For example, gangs, drug use, and guns were mentioned. “Sometimes you hear something going off and you’re not sure what it is . . . you think somebody’s dead or something.” Someone remarked that at another school “There’s a lot of dope around.”

### **Parental Responsibility for Children and Teenagers**

Several participants expressed the view that parents need to take more responsibility for their children, especially when they are teenagers. One girl voiced particular concern about teenagers having children of their own: “They don’t take control of their children because they’re too young, they’re children themselves, they don’t know what’s right themselves, so they let their child go out and run around.” Also mentioned was a situation where “Parents go away and leave the teenage kids at home for the weekend,” who then invite friends over and play loud music.

## **Police**

One participant described a situation where a bomb “blew up” in the middle of the night, and although she and her family were very concerned, the police did not investigate and told them that it was “just a couple of kids playing around.” Someone else felt that police service was good and this made her feel safer.

## **D. Coping and Supports**

The group identified parents, siblings and friends as people they would go to if they had a problem or needed help with something. However, for some problems, parents would not be approached for help. Some people indicated they cope with things on their own, preferring to spend time alone and “just think.”

## **E. Desired Resources and Services**

It was felt that the community would be a safer place if there were more things for young people to do.

A few students agreed that they know other people with problems who need support. “There’s people in my community that need a lot of help, and I think that there should be places that people can go . . . to talk to a specialist.”

**Grade Eight Students Group**  
**May, 1997**  
**7 participants (male)**  
**All of the seven boys lived in Lawrence Heights.**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Recreation Centre**

The Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre was seen as having “lots of activities.” There was baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball, table tennis, pool, and a weight room. “Everybody uses it, “anybody can go to it,” and participants reported spending a lot of time there. One commented that it helped “keep kids off the street.” Additionally, it was mentioned that there was a daycare there. There are summer activities such as trips, taking kids on hikes and boating. These activities were available to the community and didn't cost any money.

**Housing Maintenance and Renovations**

There was general agreement that a number of improvements to local housing was occurring. “They just put some new paint and lights in.” Another participant said: “They are fixing the houses up, and putting in new windows, walls, and roofing.”

**Leisure and Recreation Activities**

The Yorkdale and Lawrence shopping malls as well as restaurants were seen as nearby place to hang out at. These places didn't take “more than 15 minutes to get to.” They have an arcade upstairs, as well as food courts that contain the usual fast-food outlets such as Burger King, McDonalds, Wendy's, etc. The swimming pool at Bathurst Street was also mentioned.

Through public transit participants were able to go to Eglinton Avenue as well as other shopping malls. “We can take the subway to malls or go to basketball games.” “Fun City” on Weston Road was mentioned as another place where kids could go.

**Physical Aspects of the Neighbourhood**

Participants commented that there were lots of trees, and that the neighbourhood was usually quiet and free of garbage in the streets: “The streets are pretty clean, not dirty, there is no garbage most of the time.”

**B. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

**Accidents**

There was a statement that there were “lots of accidents” in the neighbourhood. This was seen as resulting from people “wanting to show off and go fast” with their cars.

**Crime and Safety**

There was some discussion about crime and theft in the neighbourhood. One person said that “lots of bikes are stolen around here.” Another said that lots of cars are taken as well.

A number of comments suggested safety as a concern. While participants stated they “felt safe”, it was agreed that this was not so “all the time.” One boy commented that “When I am alone, I don't feel safe.” Another said “some adults, 18 to 23 year olds scare me.” “Sometimes you get robbed” and “You need to have a lot of friends or else they come after you.” Friends were agreed as being very important to have.

### **Drugs**

Drugs were mentioned as a concern and they wished to have the incidence of drug use reduced. “Marijuana is the main thing, we haven't seen cocaine or other stuff.”

### **Family Arguments**

Some commented that their parents fight. When that happens “you watch them, and then they feel guilty.”

### **Garbage Pick-Up**

While there was disagreement about how often garbage trucks came (some said once a week, some said once a month, etc.) there was agreement that they came late at night, and didn't come often enough.

### **Gunshots at Parties**

Participants agreed that sometimes in the summer there are large parties that lead to fights and gunplay: “When there is a party, you hear gunshots go off. It happens a lot. People get drunk and stuff and get into fights and stuff.” Another added: “You hear shots - and then everybody runs and stuff.”

### **Parking Fees**

There was general annoyance about having to pay for parking spots: “Now we have to pay for parking. It's a real rip-off. Ontario Housing comes and rips us off.” “It's like 20 bucks a month.”

## **C. Coping and Supports**

The participants knew of various places that they could go for help, though it appeared that they seldom did so. These places included the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, including the youth group, Harambees. One had their doctor at the health centre. One commented that there was a “kind of community council meeting once a month or so” in the neighbourhood. Other sources of support were: family, teacher, hospital, or if necessary, the Kids Help Line.

## **D. Desired Resources and Services**

When asked what they would like to see, a number of things related to earlier comments were raised. These included “less crime and more security,” “not getting beat up,” and “less drugs and stuff.”

Additional things mentioned were a “theme park,” more stuff in the park, more basketball courts, and a “food court in the community centre.” Rent should be cheaper, it has been going up, and the streets were seen as “too dirty.” More lights were needed, less dog doo, and “people should

mind their own business.” In response to that comment however, it was commented that: “But there are drugs and stuff” implying that people should be concerned with other peoples’ business.

**Grade Eight Students Group**  
**May, 1997**  
**11 participants (female)**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Recreational Activities for Youth**

Most of the group agreed that in the area “there’s a lot of activities for youth.” The students mentioned many recreational activities they take part in, mainly at the Lawrence Heights Community Centre and at the park. “We have a centre to go play basketball or any sport you like. Sometimes we have sport days. We have parks. There’s many things for youth.” The students participated in the following activities: skating, swimming, roller-blading, bike riding, and basketball. “We play at the park. If we’re bored, instead of watching TV, you can go to the park and play.” Some participants were active in the community centre’s youth club, which has held car washes and bake sales to raise money for trips and special activities.

**School**

Overall, the students spoke positively of their school. “The educational program around here is really good.” They seemed to value the school’s code of rights, privileges, and responsibilities. For example, they explained that they had the right to learn, and their privileges included having a pop machine, dances and trips, as well as being able to use the phone in the office when necessary. They also appreciated that the school was close to their homes. “There’s a school right in the centre of all the houses. The kids can come to a school right nearby.” A few people would like to have a summer school program to “make up courses and keep us out of trouble.” Several students enjoyed participating in school sports, including basketball, soccer, and badminton.

Most of the participants indicated that they were looking forward to going to high school, although they had some concerns about the difficulty of the work and the amount of homework. It was also mentioned that “the majority of them are leaving the area, to get a different experience, from outside the area.” “We’re looking forward to it but we’re going to miss this school.”

**B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

**Concern for Younger Children**

The group agreed that it was a good thing that some graffiti in the neighbourhood had recently been cleaned up “because they put slang words on it and they put inappropriate things on it, and then the younger kids in grade one and grade two, they’ll read it and then they’ll start saying it to their friends.” “That makes the teachers go: I don’t want you in my school.” “And it gives the neighbourhood a bad reputation.” “The little kids in this school, they’re very feisty, saucy.” It was felt that some children need more discipline.

## **Crime and Safety**

In terms of safety, participants agreed that “it’s pretty much a good neighbourhood.” “You can walk down the street without getting beat up.” Although the girls felt safer during the day than at night, they did not always feel safe during the daytime. “You can walk around at night but then you have to be watching for who is coming behind you.” “You feel safe if you’re with someone.” It was felt that most, but not all people, would help you or say stop if someone was trying to beat you up. “It happens in school that some kids pick on other kids and it turns into a fight.”

Of particular concern was “a rapist who was going around” a few months ago, and that “in the last three years we had two deaths.” However, in general, participants felt that things are getting better and they feel safer. “Crime is starting to cool down, because all the bad people are going to jail.” Also contributing to the increased feeling of safety is that “There’s more police around.” Gangs are not seen as a problem.

## **Drug Use**

Most of the group agreed that: “Drugs used to be a problem about four years ago, but then the police became really strict and cleaned them out.” They also felt that: “The drug thing, you hear about it, but you don’t usually see it.” “If they deal drugs, they probably keep it down, that they don’t get caught.” “They keep it to themselves.” However, one person did see people using and dealing drugs, “all that stuff.”

## **Neighbourhood Stores**

The participants agreed that shopping in the neighbourhood was very convenient. “There’s a mall close by.” In addition to Lawrence Square, Yorkdale is also nearby. Most of the participants did not spend very much time at malls. Some felt that “It’s not very good to hang out in the mall too much. There’s some nutty people in the mall.”

## **Neighbourliness**

Several participants had lived in the Lawrence Heights community for many years, some all their lives. For some, most of their family also lived in the area. They commented on the level of comfort they feel in their neighbourhood: “You feel comforted here, once you know people. Once you get to know your neighbours, they comfort you. It’s like one big family.” Some participants agreed that “we’re respected.”

However, not everyone shared this point of view. Reflecting on their community, others commented: “I think we have more bad things than good things,” and “Every area has good people and bad people.” Some recent changes in the neighbourhood were also noted. “What’s changed is that there’s a lot of younger people now, because all the old, grown-up people they’re moving out to different places like Richmond Hill.” “Because they have money now.”

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Teenage Pregnancy**

The group agreed that: “We have a really bad problem of teenage girls being pregnant.” They expressed concern that some of the children were not well taken care of. “They don’t know how to take care of kids. They think they’re so big they can have children.” One person described a situation where “the baby was hardly wrapped up and it was freezing outside.” The participants also questioned some young mothers’ motivation for having a child. “When those young girls have children at a young age, like fifteen, fourteen, they go on welfare, then it’s tax people’s money going to them, when the tax money could be coming to the school.” “They might even do it on purpose, because they want the money.” “Some of them are having kids just so they can take the money for themselves.” Often, the grandmother takes care of the new child.

Most participants felt peer pressure was a strong contributor to teenage pregnancy. Although, one person clearly stated: “If you have your goals, and you know what you want out of life, you won’t go out there and do it, mess up your life.” Several knew teenagers with children, and felt many regretted it. The girls also described people’s reactions when they thought the participants had children of their own. “Some people go crazy just because they see someone our age carrying a baby, and pushing something -- oh, oh, it’s their kid.” “I was taking my little brother to the mall, and this man goes: oh, you shouldn’t have kids.” “People look down on you.”

### **D. Coping and Supports**

In general, the girls felt they had people they could go to if they needed help with a problem. For example, they mentioned: “Neighbours will help you a lot.” “You can talk with your friends.” “There’s the health centre.” “If you have different relatives who live in this community, you can go to them.” “You could go to a teacher who you really like.” “I would go to people in my family.”

The girls acknowledged that for some problems, especially those related to sex, violence, and abuse, they may not approach their parents or family for help. They would be more likely to speak to their friends. “Sometimes you can’t go to your parents about sex, because they feel uncomfortable.” “Certain people are scared to say certain things to their family members, depends what it is.” “Like if I was to get raped, I don’t know, I don’t think I would tell my parents. I would, but it would take a long time.” “And mostly if it’s by a family member.”

### **E. Desired Resources and Services for Youth**

The group agreed that two things were needed for youth in the community: counsellors, and a club run by and for youth. Firstly, a counsellor who teens could trust and would feel comfortable talking to was seen as very necessary. “A lot of young teens around here have problems.” “Stress and nerve problems.” In addition to an adult counsellor, a place where youth could get together without adults present was desired. “You could have a kids club, run by kids, there’s no adults, saying you can’t talk about this, you can’t talk about that. The grown-ups might rent out a place for us, the kids. There could be a leader, a child also.”

Some of the participants thought there could be more stores of interest to kids, such as a video store and a Taco Bell. They would also like to have a variety store nearer their homes.

**Grade 12 Students Group**  
**April, 1997**  
**11 participants (male)**  
*The students lived throughout Northwest Toronto.*

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Easy Access Amenities**

Having things nearby and accessible were seen as important. Examples included having “hospitals and schools near” as well as amenities such as corner stores where “If I need a pack of cigarettes at midnight, I can get them.”

**Education: Importance**

It was felt that the education being received was seen as good. “There are a lot of good things about school, education is important.”

**Family and Friends**

Having a loving family was seen as important. Also important were having friends and one participant mentioned the value of “having love from a significant other.” Parents were sometimes seen as too strict, although it was recognized that this was due to caring and concern: “Sometimes they don't let us stay out late, but they do it because they love us.”

**Leisure Activities: Local**

Participants stated that there were: “Lots of places for leisure such as restaurants, and pool halls.” There were also any number of local community centres. These included the Rogers Community Centre, the Joe Piccinnini Centre, and the Amesbury Community Centre. These centres did not charge any fees.

There were also private community centres that did charge fees. The Columbus Centre was nearby but “You needed a membership of \$300 a year.” Within these places there were “swimming pools, tennis courts, bocci, soccer, ice hockey, baseball, squash.” Some of these were organized but others were just done with friends on a pick-up basis.

**Leisure Activities: Municipal**

The participants were tuned into the resources available in Metropolitan Toronto. They mentioned attractions such as the “Sky Dome, Maple Leafs Gardens, CN Tower, bars, Fort York, Pioneer Village, and Casa Loma.”

**Leisure Activities: Shopping Malls**

A number of shopping malls were mentioned where youth could hang out. These included: Yorkdale, the Eaton Centre, and the West Side Mall. West Side had “a good arcade.” There were lots of stores in the neighbourhood “though some are expensive.”

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Cleanliness and Other Physical Aspects of the Neighbourhood and Streets**

Having clean neighbourhoods was seen as contributing to quality of life and it was felt that the neighbourhood was fairly clean. However, it was noted by some that there are many “cans on the street and littering” and that the “backstreets are really bad, the side streets aren't too safe or clean.” There was also a concern that the roads weren't being repaired. “They never fix the roads.” This was especially the case for backstreets. Noise pollution was also mentioned.

### **Crime and Safety: Lawrence Heights and Other Neighbourhoods**

There was some discussion about the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood proper: “They call my neighbourhood The Jungle.” The participants who lived there felt safe. However those who didn't live there felt it was an unsafe area for them to be. “You can't walk there if people don't know you.” “Friends of mine got mugged there. I can go there because I have connections.”

Discussion about other neighbourhoods revealed some similarities concerning safety. “I feel safe when you have friends, you know people there. If they know you, you feel safe.” Another commented that “There is always fights between nationalities and gangs.”

### **Necessities of Life**

Some initial discussion focused on issues of shelter, food, family, and democratic freedoms. Some of this was in relation to perceived current social problems: “Lots of people don't even have a place to live; they are on the street.” While the issues of shelter and hunger did not affect participants directly, as one stated: “I'm aware of it.”

### **Public Transportation**

Seen as important was having nearby transportation such as subways and buses. The subways were seen as good. “The transportation is good, the subway get you where you need to go.” But there was general agreement that the bus service has deteriorated primarily because of service cutbacks. “I live near Lawrence Heights, the buses may be a little slow, though the subways are great.” “They cut buses at Dufferin and Finch, cut down the service, it's harder for me to get where I want to go. I can't drive or fly.”

Additionally, there was annoyance at the increase in student fares. “A lot of people say TTC means Take the Car. Even downtown they closed a lot of routes, takes very long, and they are expensive. They raised fares 35 cents.”

### **Smoking and Smoking By-Laws**

There was discussion related to recent smoking by-laws and regulations. Some felt that smoking should not be banned in restaurants and bars. “You can't smoke inside a restaurant; you can't smoke at all. That's bad. People go to a bar for a beer, they want to smoke.” Others supported the smoking regulations. The same participants who opposed the smoking by-laws wanted a “smoking room in the school.”

## **Welfare System**

There was some ambivalence concerning the welfare system. One participant commented: “The welfare system, the way they are cutting it, has its ups and downs. It is good for those who actually need it. But some are abusing it. It’s bad because people who don’t need it are abusing it. I saw on the news, people on welfare are drinking in bars.”

Another commented that it was up to people to spend their money however they wanted and that it was not up to others to tell them how to spend it.

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Crime and Safety**

There was extensive discussion related to crime and personal security. There was lots of “everyday” crime. This involved stealing, prostitution, and fights. One participant noted that while “Around here it is nice, but where I live there are a lot of drugs and stealing. If you have a nice car, you get your tires and rims taken.” Another stated that there had been break-ins in his neighbourhood: “My whole street got robbed one month, you can’t leave anything in your back yard, they’ll take anything, like your barbecue.

The concern with crime extends to issues of personal safety. While “it can be safe if you watch yourself,” participants were concerned about being “jumped.” For example, one student mentioned: “This guy, he wanted my shoes.” Another participant commented: “There are people asking you if you want to buy cocaine, heroin and stuff. Yeah, crime is a very big concern.”

### **Cuts to Service: Closing of Hospitals**

At various times during the discussion issues related to health-care cutbacks arose. The first time was in discussion of accessibility to local hospitals: “You don’t really think about hospitals a lot, but you know you may need them. The way the economy is going. Where I live they are closing down a hospital. When you need a hospital you need to get to it.”

### **Cuts to Service: Deterioration of Health Care**

The participants provided examples where people they knew had received poor quality -hospital care. This concern involved hospitals sending home individuals prematurely: “They don’t give you as much treatment. I know a guy where he had a major surgery and the hospital sent him home in five days or so.” There was also concern about lack of care while in the hospital: “Nurses don’t take care of you. They used to open up the pills for you, now they just hand it to you and say take them.” “There was a lady who had breast cancer. A tube came out and she rang and rang, and my mother is screaming for the nurses to come down.” “They don’t take care of you the way they used to.”

Also mentioned was the possibility of the government delisting eye examinations from the Ontario Health Insurance Plan: “They’re thinking of charging you for having your eyes checked, OHIP won’t cover it anymore, the health cutbacks.”

**Education: Limited Resources**

There was concern about lack of resources for education. These issues included students not being able to get the courses they wanted. Specifically mentioned were photography courses. Also mentioned was the lack of computers: "They got like one computer in the school." Concerning class size, the student-teacher ratio was seen as increasing and classes were getting large. There also were limited sports activities: "They don't have football, they don't have wrestling, they don't have bocce."

**Education: School Regulations**

There was widespread and general annoyance with school regulations regarding school uniforms. "Sometimes the rules are stupid. They hassle us too much about uniforms." There was a sense that the school was more concerned at times about the uniforms than whether students were doing well. "They should care about other things. They tell you about your uniform, but not if you're failing. I don't think the priorities are straight." If there was an infraction, rather than wait until the class was over, students would be pulled out in the middle of class and then "When I come back, I don't know what was going on."

**Education: Teachers**

Related to this was a belief that some teachers did not really care about students or their well-being: "Some teachers are more interested in their stocks than whether you're learning." Guidance counsellors were rarely used.

**D. Coping and Supports**

In response to how people dealt with problems there were a variety of personal coping responses: "I get angry", "I drink myself to sleep", "take a walk or drive", "smoke a lot of cigarettes", "eating", "talk to someone about it." When seeking help from others, the order of priority given was "friends, parents, and the cool teachers." One mentioned a help hot line, but generally, friends were the most used.

**E. Desired Resources and Services**

To deal with crime issues, participants would like to see more police on the street and institution of more neighbourhood watches. Related to school, they would like to see "More education programs that they are trying to cut, like photography." They want more programs that students are interested in, and sports such as wrestling and bocci. More school spirit would be good as well. When you go to a sports event "You don't see anybody there."

**Grade 12 Students Group**  
**April, 1997**  
**8 participants (female)**  
*The students lived throughout Northwest Toronto.*

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Crime and Safety**

The neighbourhood was viewed as “pretty safe.” “The good thing here is that there’s no violence, you don’t have to worry about being beaten up or anything like that, it’s pretty mellow.” At school, there are “little fights here and there, but that’s common.” The group noted that, about four or five years ago, when the neighbourhood and school population started to include people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, there was more violence. “When it started to change, when different groups started to come in, there was a lot of tension, but now, they’ve gotten used to each other.” “Fights here tend to be fist fights, there’s usually no weapons involved, so people aren’t really scared . . . it’s not like in the States.” They felt the streets were safe and quiet. “The worst thing that’s ever happened around here is when they burned down the park” [approximately three years ago]. In one participant’s neighbourhood, there have been gang fights.

**Parkland and Open Space**

Parks in a community were seen as a good thing, especially for younger children. “I have two little brothers who can go outside without having to have my mom go with them.” Close to their school, there is a park where students can go at lunch.

**School: As a Place for Learning**

Some of the participants indicated that school was a good thing, in particular “for those who appreciate it . . . some just come here for fun, they don’t care about the classes or learning anything, those who actually want to learn appreciate school.” One person appreciated that there is a choice of schools in the area.

**School: Cultural Diversity**

Most of the participants agreed that “Our school is pretty multicultural.” They felt this was a good thing “because we’re all learning about each other.” Violence between different cultural groups has diminished

**School: Extracurricular Activities**

A few people participated in extra-curricular activities such as volleyball, baseball, cheerleading, track, and swimming. Otherwise, “we come, we learn, we leave.” Some other activities that people can participate in include band, the prom committee, the yearbook committee, and a library club. “After school activities are good for those who enjoy it. When they [the teachers] weren’t here, you could tell that the school was really depressed.”

### **School: Music Program**

Students appreciated the extra-curricular activities, in particular, they spoke highly of the school's music program. "The only really good thing with this school is its music program." "We have a good music program." "It's really advanced . . . It's the only thing that the people at this school fight for is that music program. We have a really good teacher there. He really cares about us and we care about him."

### **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

#### **Leaving High School and Future Plans**

Some of the students planned to attend college next year, while others would remain in high school for their OACs. Some had a clear idea of their future plans and courses they planned to take in college or university, such as photography, computer programming, and law. Others were more uncertain. "I have no idea, there's so many things you can pick from and whatever you go into, it's hard to turn back and then change, after high school, what you want to be."

#### **Part-time Jobs**

Some of the students held part-time jobs and were saving for university and college tuition. "I'm saving up for university. Hopefully I'll get a scholarship." One person had plans to move out and was saving for rent. The jobs also provided spending money. Those who were not working would like to do so, but have experienced difficulty finding a job. They felt that you "need to know somebody."

#### **Public Transportation**

One participant commented that TTC service is "Good during the day but not at night." She would like to see the subways run later.

### **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

#### **Community Centres**

None of the participants went to community centres. They felt that the centres are not geared towards people their age. Cost is also a factor. "The one [community centre] down here you have to pay for, so that defeats the purpose of having it, if you can't even go." "It would be cool if there was a place you could go where you could hang out and watch TV or whatever with your friends, and it wouldn't cost anything. Just a building with a TV and no parents." It would be "something to do after school."

#### **Lack of Activities for Teenagers**

Most of the participants felt that in the neighbourhoods where they live, there is "nothing to do." Although, one person described her neighbourhood as "nothing like here, it's fun there, in the summertime there's always music playing loud, and no one cares, no one complains or anything, everyone's just doing their own thing."

The students agreed that they tend to spend their free time downtown or at Yorkdale Mall. "You want to find people from our school, you go to Yorkdale, you go downtown." "You can't really do anything here [in this community] because there's not that many things to do. It's more for the old

people and for families. You have the community centres for younger people and the parks. For us, you would have to go farther out. We're more based with our friends. We're really, really close with our friends. We go out to the movies or places that you can hang out."

**School: Library**

The students used public libraries for their school work and felt that the school library "has nothing."

**School: Respect for Students**

As senior students, participants felt they should be treated with more respect and given more independence. "It would be cool if they respected the teenagers more. You don't have to call people's parents every two seconds. We're all seniors, we're all graduating this year, going off to college, some of us are moving out and living on our own and they're still calling our parents when you're two minutes late for school. " "If you're 18 years old, you're old enough to know that if you miss that class you're going to miss that work. It's just like university . . . If you want to miss it, you miss it. Then when you fail, it's your problem. They're always hassling your parents for everything." "They spend more time worrying about what you're wearing in school than what you're learning."

**School: Teachers**

The students described a good teacher as "someone who cares, who actually wants to teach, who enjoys what they do." "If they actually show that they care . . . there are certain teachers in this school we will not go near." "There are some teachers that the minute you walk into their class, they say 'I'm not your friend, I don't want to hear your problems.' Who wants to learn from somebody like that, who doesn't give a care." One participant commented that "We have teachers teaching classes they aren't qualified to teach." The students recalled only one teacher who asked the students for feedback on their teaching.

**School: Unfair Treatment**

Some of the participants felt that students were sometimes treated in an inconsistent and unfair manner. "There's a lot of inequality." For example, some of the girls complained that the school takes boys' sports more seriously than girls, and that the boys get to use the better equipment. They also thought it was unfair that students are labelled as general or advanced. It was felt that some students get special treatment from teachers.

#### **D. Coping and Supports**

When asked about people or services in the area where they could go for help with a problem, one participant said “I’ve never heard of any in my area.” Someone else knew of agencies in the downtown area where you can talk to a counsellor, and there was a youth centre in her neighbourhood where people can talk to someone. Also mentioned was the Kids Help Phone. One participant commented that “I have never had a problem that big that I had to go to somebody else and talk to them.”

Most of the group agreed that “One thing you don’t do is use our school guidance office.” The students felt that the guidance counsellors could be better trained. “You go to them when you have problems with your timetable, that’s about it.” However, they also agreed that “There’s teachers you can talk to in this school, if you know them well, you can talk to them.”

#### **E. Desired Resources and Services**

The students had numerous suggestions for ways the school could be improved. “This school doesn’t have a whole lot of stuff in it.” It was felt that more money needed to be invested in the school, for example, for equipment and supplies. “We’ve got potholes in our gym floor. We don’t have paints for art classes.” In reference to the building itself, the students would like to have a better air conditioning system, clean bathrooms, and bigger hallways. They would also like more courses to choose from, including creative arts, such as drama and photography, as well as a smaller student population.

The students would appreciate assistance to make the transition to college or university. “There’s not a lot of stuff in the area that helps you make that change. The change from high school to college or university is huge. A lot of people move out on their own from living at home their entire lives. They’ve got to work now. There’s a college prep class, but it’s general level. There’s not a lot to help people. So unless you know people who are in university and college and you have already seen how things work, there’s not a lot to help you make the change. “You can go on a tour of the college if you take the peer helping.”

Some participants indicated they would spend more time in the community if there were more places to go, such as little shops, restaurants, and arcades. “Things that don’t cost a lot and you can get to.”

**Secondary School Students Group**  
**May, 1997**  
**10 participants**  
**Lawrence Heights/Black Creek Residents**

The participants were all in grade 12 or OAC (13) except for one in grade 10. Some lived in Lawrence Heights, while others lived in Black Creek and other neighbourhoods. All were African-Canadian.

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Health Centre (CHC)**

The participants who lived in Lawrence Heights knew much about the health centre: “Many people go there, they have a youth group there, kind of like what we are doing now.” One commented: “I was with the youth group.” Others commented that its use was mainly for primary care: “You just go there to see a physician.” These particular participants knew of it but did not use it. Additionally, participants knew of the community social work section at Lawrence Square, and that the centre had “meetings and groups for elderly people.”

**Community Recreation Centre**

The Lawrence Heights Community Centre was spoken of positively: “The community centre is good.” It has a variety of activities and features including a weight room, basketball courts, a multi-purpose room, and a seniors room. Additionally, they play music on Fridays.

Some of the activities mentioned were the youth groups, dancing, and a “Rap-Off” where people come and perform. The Centre also has day care facilities. The Centre was seen as a place where many people go.

**Easy Accessibility to Amenities**

There was general agreement that the Lawrence Heights area was accessible to and convenient for amenities: “Things are convenient, like Lawrence Square is right there.” Shopping malls are nearby: “Yorkdale is a hop, skip and a jump away” as is the Barbara Frum public library. A bookmobile comes around Tuesdays and Thursdays “for little kids.” The health centre is right in the neighbourhood and the TTC can take you pretty much anywhere.

**Education: Importance**

There was general agreement that doing well in school was important: “School will get you by too.” While not enthusiastic about attending school, participants were likely to agree with the statement: “I’m here to do my work and to learn.” In a later discussion about part-time jobs, one participant commented: “School comes first.”

**Maple Creek Recreation Centre**

The other centre mentioned is in the Sheppard-Keele area. It is seen as a key social centre: “Everybody comes down to the Rec. The Rec is somewhere where everybody can come to.” Like the Lawrence Heights Community Centre, it is a city facility, run by Parks and Recreation. It has basketball courts, a swimming pool, and a weight room, among other things.

### **Neighbourhood: Cultural Background and Interests**

A discussion centred about living and talking with people who understand you. “What makes it good for me is that there are people in the neighbourhood that understand you.” It became clear that this affinity referred to issues such as place of origin, cultural and ethnic background, and colour. “The way you talk, the background. Like cultural, Caribbean, basically coloured too.”

People of similar background are seen as more sympathetic: “People that understand you.” One participant gave the example of similar interests: “You have things in common, listen to the same music, want to go to the same jams.” Another commented on the similarity of aspirations: “We have everything in common, want the same goals, want the same programs.” Michael Jordan appeared to be a role model for the boys, all of whom played basketball.

A discussion also took place around some slang words such as “marved” (hungry) or “bogue”. “You say bogue and a white person will say: What do you mean by that?” Participants stated that a “bogue” was a “yahoo.” The point was that certain things are understood primarily by people of colour. Two participants discussed issues related to being light-skinned. They felt that they were sometimes not accepted by both races, black and white.

### **Neighbourhood: Cultural Identification and Solidarity**

In a similar vein, being black was seen as reflecting solidarity with similar life situations. In response to an inquiry about the neighbourhoods people lived in, participants felt that whether they lived in Lawrence Heights, in Black Creek or elsewhere: “Everybody's the same, everybody comes from the same place. Everybody has their own family problems and not everybody is rich there.”

### **Parkland and Outdoor Space**

All the participants agreed that there were many parks in or near the areas they lived and most used them. The boys commented on the basketball courts that were in these parks. “It’s really quiet, there are parks you can go to.”

### **Recreational Activities**

There was some discussion around the seasons and how these affect what they do for fun. “We are not winter fans, you don't see people out in the winter time.” During the winter, participants are indoors and at the community centres. During the summer “We will play outside, sit on the park benches and socialize.” Participants commented on two specific community centres, the Lawrence Heights and Maple Creek centres.

### **Scott Mission**

Some participants knew of the Scott Mission having community programs for younger children: “They come around on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They have groups for the young kids to keep them out of trouble.”

### **Welcoming and Openness**

A recurring theme was that while participants may live in predominantly black areas, and may

hang out with black friends, they are open and receptive to people of different races and backgrounds. Concerning playing basketball or going to the recreation centres: “The people there are not like one people, not just coloured, anyone can go there. When you play everybody does it together. Even when they don't know you, they welcome you.”

Another commented that “I just mingle with everybody. There are just a few who feel threatened.” [This latter comment came up in terms of racial issues.]

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Crime and Safety**

Personal safety among participants in their own neighbourhood was not a concern: “We live here, we know everybody. “I'll walk anywhere here. But elsewhere I'll be afraid.” Boys are more at risk as they are seen as encroaching on territory. “If it's girls, then it will be ok.”

### **Public Transportation**

While the subway stop is nearby, there was real annoyance that the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood bus: “Doesn't go after 7:00 PM. It stops at 7:00 PM.” “That's not good.”

### **School as Community of Communities**

A lively discussion centred about how people of different races and ethnic backgrounds tended to hang out together within school. “When we come to school we tend to stick together.” Many examples were given of how kids stick together: “If you go to the cafeteria you will see all the black people and the Spanish people, all the Italian, all the Philippine in their place.” “If a new black person comes to the school, even if they are African, they tend to sit in the same seat that every black person sits in.”

This was not seen as a negative feature. It was thought of as reflecting a sense of community within the school. As one said: “It's like community. The school itself is one community and it is made up of other little communities. It was not seen as deliberate, it kind of “just happens.” It was compared to what happens in the community in terms of where people live: “It's the same thing in your neighbourhood or community. There are people you can relate to.” “I don't know why, but that is the way it is.”

### **School: Black History Month**

A lively discussion centred on Black History Month, or the lack of Black History Month in the school this year. Nothing happened until the last two days and even then “it was about Africa, what about Canada? That anything happened the last two days was due to students complaining when it became clear that nothing was to happen: “It was very disrespectful.” It was felt that had it been another ethnic group's month a lot more would have been done.

One participant commented that “It's our fault. After the first week we should have done something, we shouldn't have waited.” Someone else countered: “We have to get teacher support” in the school. It was felt that “four teachers that would be willing to do something.”

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Housing and Concern About Privatization**

Housing was seen as “not bad.” Windows are being fixed. But some things are still broken and

are not replaced: "It's been 11 years since we got a new refrigerator." Some felt that repairs were taking place solely to prepare the housing for sale to the private sector. "They're fixing up the neighbourhood and then selling it to the private sector. Then they'll raise the rent."

### **Racial Tensions in School**

There was some tension in the school among groups, but it appeared that this was not something extraordinary. Sometimes however, these would be interpreted as involving race: "Sometimes they'll brush you - make contact." "They don't understand our culture." Even though you apologized, person would push you back, they're looking for a fight."

Participants indicated that there were occasional instances within school where the term "nigger" would be directed towards them. They further explained that "Black people say it to each other, but when a white person says it to you, it means you're a slave to them." Participants perceived that people will say it to them because "They know you will react to it." In terms of how to deal with it, "You could go up and punch them, but you brush it off. It's best to ignore it."

There was some discussion about whether racial taunts were occasional or chronic. There was disagreement about the incidence. One participant stated: "I talk to everyone, I'm not faced with it." Another felt that it was more common, but that it was best to ignore it. As one participant stated: "I think that a nigger is a lazy ignorant person. It is not a colour, it is an attitude."

### **Racism and Anger**

The view was expressed that racism leads to the development of anger on the part of black people. "If racist thinks we're thieves, might as well do it." After all the oppression that they have experienced, anger can be translated into a "We will show you" attitude. This view was countered by the argument that "we are responsible" for our behaviour and that we shouldn't "live up to the stereotypes."

In terms of anger one participant commented: "There is only so much that you can take." One person countered: "We use our colour as an excuse. We can become anything you want." "But we have to try 1,000 times harder."

### **Racism and Denial of Services**

A specific issue was the unwillingness of most eating establishments to deliver food to Lawrence Heights locations after dark. "Certain places won't deliver after dark in the neighbourhood." These included Pizza Pizza and Kentucky Fried Chicken among others: "It's all of them." This led to someone suggesting that "it may also be our fault, I can't blame them" because of the crime potential in the neighbourhood. Another responded: "It's bad everywhere."

Participants commented that getting home at night was a problem since taxis would not pick them up. One related a story of how three boys and three girls could not get a taxi to take them home: "They won't pick us up, cabs won't stop. But an African will pick you up, they understand." If they do stop, "They'll say, I can't drive you down."

### **Racism and Jobs**

An issue that emerged was the belief that employers will not offer people a job because they are black: "On your resume, they look at your name and can tell it's a black name. This is a black person."

## **Racism and the Police**

There was general and intense dislike of the police among many of the participants. There was also a sense that the police are over-patrolling the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood. “You always see a cop in the jungle - we give it that name.” Police were seen as harassing youth solely because they were black. “Even when you're not doing anything, they just come by and stop you and you never hear anything about it.”

Within the Black Creek community the police are seen as harassing youth and “having the power to do things.” These things included undercover police “planting stuff.”

It was felt that the police are assuming that black youth are likely to be criminals. “Police assume that if you're driving a big car, you're a drug dealer.” One participant related a story of how he and two friends were approached by police and hassled over a report that some youth had been seen smoking marijuana in the TTC. “Cops came up and said some guys were smoking, was it you. They gave us a hard time, and frisked my friends.” The police needed to “lay off.”

Incidences were told of police throwing youth up against the wall and “If you report it they can get away with it.” Police are seen as “shooting first, asking questions later, planting drugs,” and saying they were shot at when this may not have been the case.

## **Racism in the Community**

There was a sense that racism was worse in the community-at-large than in school. “It's even worse in the community. In the school they hesitate, on the street, you may not see them again.” In stores participants felt that they were perceived as potential thieves because of their being black. “You go in the store, they just watch me and they follow me around. In Lawrence Square, at Zellers, they follow me around.”

Another participant commented that store clerks would assume that because they were black they couldn't afford expensive goods: “They try and sell you something that is cheaper, a lot cheaper.” An example was given of one person looking for shoes and being offered cheaper ones.

Another related a story where a TTC driver made her stand in the rain and then verbally abused her as a black person. A white woman who witnessed it all was “so upset, she said she would call the TTC.”

One participant commented that things had certainly gotten better since the times blacks were slaves in the American South. “But it is still there but it's covered up now.” Not everybody is like that. Just a few who feel threatened.”

## **Racism in the Media**

There was general agreement that the media was biased and presented distorted news reports. “The media is putting us down. They always put pictures in the newspaper which upsets people.” “In every race there is good and bad but they portray you to be the worse person.” If there are some good news stories such as the neighbourhood being fixed up or improved “the media will limit coverage to a 30 second clip, even though they have the most boring stuff on TV.” In regards to issues related to the police, for example, “the media will always distort the story.”

## **Racism in Society**

There was extensive discussion and debate about issues of racism in society, in the school, in the community, and in the media. The discussion identified a number of themes and issues, each of which is discussed below. There was general agreement that race was associated with the presence of a number of stereotypes. These included some stereotypes such as all black people being into rap songs, for example. It also manifests itself when it comes to school achievement, and crime. "I got a 73 and he said "I didn't know black people were smart." "In the school, I'm on the honour roll, and the person says 'You must have taken easy courses.'" "One participant commented that black youth were more susceptible to stereotypes and had to be careful to watch the kind of clothing they wore such as a Malcolm X coat or a bandana which could be taken as representing membership in a gang.

## **D. Coping and Supports**

The participants discussed how they cope with racism: "It's a lot of pressure. We're only teenagers." One commented: "I go home, get it behind me, do my school work." Another person commented that she had been in therapy to deal with anger. Her current way of dealing with it was to stand up until an apology was received: "I will snap at them. I don't let it slide I don't want them to walk all over me. I keep it up until they do something."

One person commented that: "We think a lot." "You can't snap-throw you in jail, and they will blame you." One person commented that you don't snap because "it's not right" not just to avoid punishment. Participants said that they had their friends and family to talk with. Another commented that playing basketball was a way of coping. There was hesitancy to talk about problems with a service provider or counsellor: "You don't want to go talk to someone because you hear that they will chat your business around."

When asked if there were any community resources available, one participant mentioned the Black Secretariat. It is apparently based in Riverdale and Regent Park. It was featured on television and has a number of summer programs. "We all come together to learn about Black history, take trips, do drama." "There is one on Oakwood, and everyone is welcome." A number of participants asked for information about the Black Secretariat. Besides that there was a sense that little community support available: "We have no group or institution to depend on to get results." "It always goes back to colour."

### **E. Desired Resources and Services**

Some of the desired resources were related to issues raised earlier in the discussion. These included having the bus run after 7:00 PM. Greater sensitivity among school staff would be appreciated as would some after-school services.

There was some discussion related to the deteriorating condition of the local parks. “Fix the park up for the little kids.” There was only “one bench, one slide, one swing.” The basketball court should be fixed up: “They should put up some rims, clean up once in a while, have a basketball tournament with teams.”

All participants felt that having part-time jobs in the community would be helpful. There should also be some crafts activities.

# Seniors

**Seniors Tenants Group  
January, 1997**

**8 participants (an interpreter was used for two Spanish-speaking seniors)**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Health Centre (CHC)**

The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre (LHCHC) is seen as a valuable part of the community. It “helps the neighbourhood an awful lot.” Participants spoke of the medical care the centre provides, as well as the work being done on broader health issues, for example, “Lynn has community meetings, and George helps with family benefits.”

Being able to recognize other people they know from the LHCHC helps to create a sense of belonging in the community: “We see the people and we know them, we don’t know names, but we still say hello.” The Spanish-speaking seniors in the group like meeting with other Hispanic seniors at the health centre. As for any changes they would like to see at the LHCHC, someone suggested a gym (with work-out equipment), which would help people stay active during the winter.

**Community Health Centre: Staff**

It was agreed that the people at the LHCHC really care about each other and the community. The staff of the health centre are regarded as being helpful and friendly, and always taking the time to see people. One participant commented that the LHCHC “feels like family.” Someone else mentioned that people notice if you are not there and they will call you.

**Community Recreation Centre**

The group noted that the Parks and Recreation sector is geared for people of all ages. As seniors, they felt it was especially important to have activities to participate in such as those provided at the community centre. One person commented: “The community centre helps the community so that people are not just sitting around in their apartments all day.” For example, the seniors can do ceramics and knitting at Wednesday Morning Wonders. There is also line dancing, as well as euchre and bingo. The gym is also available for sports and physical activities.

**Community Involvement**

Participants agreed that it is beneficial to be involved in the community. One participant felt that getting involved in the community and meeting people was an essential part of what makes life good: “It’s good to get involved as much as you can handle.” Another participant shared: “Since involvement, I’ve been happier.” Some of the things in the community the seniors are involved with are: choir, Souper Seniors, Wednesday Morning Wonders, a Tuesday Drop-in, and the Action Squad.

**Crime and Safety**

Most people feel safe in the neighbourhood, mainly due to the good neighbours they have. They also noted that there is a security person who drives around and checks the buildings, and who is available if anything goes wrong. “The security guy helps everybody around here.” In summing up the safety issues, one participant said: “Security means caring for others.”

## **The Local Mall**

The mall is an important part of the community for both shopping and socializing. As one person noted: “Every time I go (to the mall) I can meet up to 20 people I know.” The seniors appreciate that they can get to the mall very easily. “I just run across the street and pick up anything that I need.” There is no smoking in the mall, which one person saw as a disadvantage.

## **Neighbourliness**

The group of seniors valued their neighbours very much. The neighbourliness of the community was evident and is obviously an important factor in maintaining good quality of life. Several people noted that neighbours watch out for on another and offer help when needed. For example, one participant said that neighbours “check up on you if you are sick, or if you need anything in the store. The neighbours knock on the door and ask if you are okay and if there is anything they can do.” Someone else commented: “Neighbours are good to me, I really appreciate that...they knock on my door and ask me where I’ve been and ask me if I need anything.” “You always need people to keep an eye on each other.”

In addition to having neighbours to help them, the seniors also demonstrated that they themselves are good neighbours. “I go and help others whenever they need me. I welcome people to the community, and tell them what is going on in their community. I’m always there if they need me.” “I love, trust, and have faith in people who know me and live in my community.” It was felt that neighbours are some of the few people you can trust.

## **Parkland and Outdoor Space**

The parkland and outdoor space of the Lawrence Heights community provides both physical and social advantages to its residents. Everyone agreed that summer was an especially enjoyable time. During the warmer months, people are able to meet their neighbours in the park. As one person commented: “I like to sit on my bench, people call it my office . . . I don’t want to sit at home like a dummy watching my T.V. The park is a place to go to meet my neighbours, which I like.” The beauty of the greenery and the gardens also make people feel better, and one person suggested that “that’s what keeps people here.” In the summer people socialize outside and they have a walking club. Winter is a more difficult time and the seniors miss being outdoors: “It is easy for people to get cabin fever from staying at home . . . If it wasn’t for the parks and the health centre, people wouldn’t survive.”

## **Public Transportation**

For public transportation, the seniors use the regular TTC (subway and buses), as well as the Community Bus. Good public transportation is important since most seniors do not have access to a car. People are happy with the TTC service, and mentioned that the bus is always on time. People share bus schedule information and use the telephone number that you can call to find out exactly when your bus is coming.

The seniors appreciate the community bus, which takes them to local malls and other places nearby. “The service is very convenient. The drivers are nice. They help you with parcels. They are a godsend especially in winter.” The Action Squad worked to ensure that this service was maintained for community residents: “They were going to cut the service, so a few of us went down and took care of that, and now we still have the bus.”

## **The Tenants Group**

The Action Squad is a seniors tenants group who meet to discuss and work on housing and community issues. “If anyone sees anything that needs to be done, write it down and present it to the Action Squad. One copy is given to the housing company and one copy is kept by the Action Squad so that they (the housing company) can’t say that we aren’t telling them what is going on.” For example, the Action Squad has helped to get house and street repairs done, as well as new mailboxes and bus shelters in the community. They were also instrumental in saving the community bus service to Lawrence Heights. All agreed that the Action Squad was a help to the community and a great group to be a part of.

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Neighbourhood Diversity**

Participants agreed that the Lawrence Heights community is very culturally diverse. Generally, it was felt that people try to live well together. For the most part, people are friendly and helpful to everyone. Reflecting on the benefits of living in a culturally diverse community, one person commented: “People like an expanding universe.” However, some conflict was mentioned and several people agreed that “the community needs people, community workers, to help hereditary enemies, and to get people to live together.”

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Building Access**

There was some concern about access to the buildings. Because there is no buzzer system and the outside doors are sometimes locked, people can find themselves locked out of the building. One participant had a personal account of helping someone who was indeed locked out of her building for many hours. On the other hand, sometimes the doors are left open and anyone can enter the building. Both of these situations are troubling, especially for the Spanish-speaking seniors who felt they may not be able to explain the situation in order to get help. One participant suggested that “you have to give your spare keys to a relative.” Also, the Action Squad is trying to get an improved security system, i.e., a buzzer system and different locks.

Someone suggested that a buddy system where seniors check up on others seniors would be beneficial. It was mentioned that one time a man who had passed away was not found until five days later.

### **Cuts to Service**

The group expressed concern about cutbacks. For example, someone wondered: “How do you get help when they keep cutting everything?” Specifically, they mentioned cuts to libraries, bus service, and maintenance service in the community. One person commented that “with the government cutbacks, it is going to have a negative effect on people’s quality of life in all aspects.”

### **Reduced Maintenance Services**

Due to cutbacks, there has been a substantial decrease in maintenance service to the seniors' buildings. The group agreed that "one staff is not enough." Similarly, it was felt that meetings with property management staff need to be held more frequently.

Reduced maintenance service is a major concern for residents and the Action Squad cited a number of problems. In general, it takes longer for a maintenance person to complete a task. For example, one person shared this experience: "The roof is leaking, and the paint is peeling off, and they left it for two months...they promise but it doesn't happen." Snow removal has also been adversely affected: "They are worse than ever this year because they don't clean the streets or apartments." Others commented that "they were supposed to change the stoves and fridges because they are all broken," and "the cupboard hinges are all wearing out, basically all the houses need to be fixed." The one thing that helps to promote cleanliness is the garbage chutes in front of the buildings. One participant suggested that some of the youth who live in the community could help the maintenance manager with some of his duties.

### **D. Coping and Supports**

Overall, this group of seniors felt they had good support systems for coping, including neighbours and family. Also mentioned were the community health centre and the community centre. People also rely on religious and cultural organizations. For example, the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance was known to help many people. Some people in the group also referred to a telephone number they could call if they needed help and someone would get right back to them.

**Seniors Recreation Group**  
**February, 1997**  
**13 participants**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Health Centre (CHC)**

Some of the seniors visit the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre (LHCHC) for medical care and they find the care provided to be good. Additionally, some people attend various group activities at the CHC. One woman mentioned the Tuesday night gatherings where they play cards, talk, or do exercise. Another commented: "I use the health centre, my doctor is there, and as well, the Action Squad meetings, every Wednesday night." In sum, "they [LHCHC] do a lot for the people, and the children."

**Community Health Centre: Staff**

"We have a good health centre, the doctors, nurses, and everyone are so friendly." Another mentioned "They can't do enough to help, if you need help, you just need to call."

**Community Recreation Centre**

The Feisty Seniors meet at the Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre, where they can also participate in many activities such as bingo, drama, bowling, Tai Chi, and ceramics. These activities were mentioned as important for helping the seniors stay active; some of the seniors come to the community centre four or five days a week. The Recreation Centre also offers activities for adults and children, such as drama and basketball.

**Easy Access to Shopping**

Participants appreciate that there are convenient places to shop in the neighbourhood. For example, they can get groceries at Fortino's, which is close by. "The shopping has always been good in this community."

**Seniors Recreation Council**

Group members spoke very positively about their involvement with the Feisty Seniors. One person remarked: "I really like being a part of the group, I find no fault in it." Another participant commented that the group members are "beautiful people, well organized, and social." Someone else agreed that "the people in the group are very sociable, they are wonderful!"

Membership to this group costs only \$6.00 a year. Participants appreciate the low-cost membership for this excellent program. "Where else can you join a group for this cheap, that gets you everything that you get here?" "There is nothing in comparison, if you have to go outside the community."

Participants voiced their appreciation for the staff affiliated with the Feisty Seniors: "We really have to thank Lynn and Deborah." "We love Lynn . . . we are very happy to have her here . . . she is the same with everyone." "Deborah needs to get a gold medal! . . . she's working to keep us together." "Harry is our kind of guy."

## **Volunteer Work**

One participant, who played the piano for various community events, mentioned the merit of participating in the community and sharing your talents with others. Others also felt that volunteering contributes to good quality of life. For example, someone mentioned her volunteer work with children in the community, helping them to do ceramics. Similarly, another woman volunteered with her church and the vacation Bible school.

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Crime and Safety**

The issue of safety was briefly discussed. Most participants did not feel vulnerable in the community. However one participant did mention that “I try not to go out at night, or walk down dark alleys.”

### **Public Transportation**

All of the participants relied on public transportation to get around. Many used both the TTC and the Community Bus. Participants appreciated these services, but saw room for improvement.

“It (the TTC) is good during the day for being in a suburb, but if you are handicapped and unable to get around, it is impossible to get services in or out of the community after dark. You need a car or taxi.” The group also reported that there have been cutbacks to TTC service at night and on weekends, and “these hours are not conducive to the well-being of seniors.” Some people also mentioned that they would like to see cheaper fares on the TTC.

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Cuts to Service: Reduced Maintenance**

The seniors noted that due to cutbacks, maintenance service has been reduced and this has had an adverse affect on the community. For example, there is an accumulation of garbage and this has contributed to a problem with insects in the apartments: “There are bugs and insects we’ve never had before, because things don’t get taken out.” Participants felt that some action should be taken on this issue. One participant said: “We need inspectors to investigate. Things need to be seen to . . . for a few years things have been building up.” Another member commented, “We need a big change to clear this and to organize things the right way.” “I see a lot of pollution. We need to keep things in order, obey the laws of the land . . . make sure there are no environments that will affect you later.”

Also of concern to the seniors was that snow removal services are poor, making conditions unsafe. “No one does it [remove the snow], so there is nowhere to walk, or put your foot.” “It is dangerous to go from car to bus stop or going out to put out the garbage.”

### **Maintenance of Apartments**

Participants made reference to the fact that some of the apartments in the community are in a state of disrepair. It was felt that instead of dealing with minor problems as they come up, the maintenance people wait until an entire apartment can be fixed up. This leaves some people with inadequate conditions. “The buildings are due for renovations, therefore they are being purposefully neglected.”

### **Size of Apartments**

Some residents of North Acres, an apartment complex for seniors, expressed particular displeasure with their apartments. One participant commented “the units are small, they are not built according to standards of today.” Also, “we have no kitchen, and no where to put up anything on the walls.” Someone else summarized: “The conditions are not pretty where we live.”

One participant mentioned that “in our apartments, it is not so easy to know people, just like a jail, that people don’t trust you as much as they used to.” Others commented that they prefer living in townhouses.

### **D. Coping and Supports**

When asked about coping with problems, the seniors responded in terms of emergency medical situations. “We could call an ambulance or a taxi for a health problem.” “If we live by ourselves we have to get to a hospital.” “People need to feel secure in themselves in their community. If something happens, there is a hospital and an ambulance to help them out.”

Other places where people can get help are the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre and the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance. The Area Alliance is a church-based organization. “They are very good, just call Miriam...our community worker.” “They are there if we need them.”

### **E. Desired Resources and Services**

Many members of the group use the Community Bus, which goes to the local malls, to Baycrest, and to the subway. They would like to see this bus run on Saturdays, since this is when many people do their errands. “It is the most important day for us. I believe it should run for us on Saturdays.”

**Hispanic Seniors Group**  
**February, 1997**  
**6 participants (group carried out in Spanish with translation)**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Hispanic Seniors Group**

The community health centre was identified as a place that helps people cope. In particular, the Hispanic Seniors Club is very important as it provides an opportunity to meet with others and have discussions in their own language. They felt very fortunate to have Rosa Maria to help them when needed.

**Peacefulness of Canada**

For many of the Hispanic seniors, the fact that Canada is not a country at war contributes to their quality of life. They indicated that the relative peace in Canada makes them feel healthier.

**B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

**Medical Care**

The Hispanic seniors had some criticism of the medical care they have received in Canada. The health care system is viewed as being commercial and run like a business, and participants perceive a general lack of caring and interest in people's problems from health care providers. Doctors were seen as wanting to rush and being concerned about their own time and money. In the group's experience, this has led to insensitive care and inaccuracy in diagnosis. Language is not seen as the problem, since in most instances the physician was Spanish-speaking or an interpreter was used. Some participants thought health care in Canada would be better than what they have experienced. However, health care in Brazil and Argentina for example, is seen as being of higher quality.

On the positive side, participants felt that Canadian doctors were capable and noted that there is access to advanced technology, such as x-rays. One participant visited the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre for medical care and was pleased with the service he has received.

**Neighbourhood Diversity**

A positive aspect of the community is its multiculturalism, but this can sometimes cause problems with communication.

**Neighbourliness**

Most participants had good relationships with their neighbours, who were generally friendly and quiet. Some had Spanish-speaking neighbours. Some neighbours were described as having personal problems, such as alcoholism and family violence, and these were most evident on the weekends.

**C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

**Concern about Cuts**

Most of the participants indicated that they were concerned about the effect of recent cutbacks. For example, one person was worried that Ontario's high quality education system is at risk with the proposed amalgamation of the municipalities. Additionally, cutbacks in maintenance service have had a negative impact on the community.

### **Crime and Safety**

The group expressed concerns about safety. For example, a woman whose children no longer live with her hopes to move because she does not feel safe at home alone. Another participant related that when he moved into the area a few years ago and attended a meeting at the community health centre, he was told not to go out after 6 pm because it was not safe. The death of a young girl a year and half ago was frightening.

### **Drug Use Among Youth**

Drug use among youth is seen as a serious problem, although not all the seniors have observed it directly. However, some have seen drugs (cocaine and marijuana) being freely bought and sold in the community. Drug use is seen as getting worse. Also, it appears to be more of a problem in Lawrence Heights than in other areas, such as nearby Keele and Lawrence.

A few participants who have seen drugs being used were afraid of the consequences if they said anything. Someone else commented that there is little parents can do to help their children, as parents do not receive support from the legal system.

### **Housing**

Housing where people feel they are living with dignity was identified as an important factor affecting one's health and quality of life. Unfortunately, most of the participants were dissatisfied with their housing in Lawrence Heights. They felt that the maintenance staff did not care about residents' needs, and this was especially so if you did not speak English. One participant commented that he thought service and conditions would improve with a Spanish-speaking superintendent, but they have not.

### **Reduced Maintenance Services**

The group noted that the janitorial staff has been cut back. For example, in one building staff has been reduced from four people to only one person, and this is not enough to maintain the building properly. This prompts concerns about hygiene and cleanliness. Participants commented that the garbage is not looked after and the buildings are dirty.

Similarly, it was noted that the snow on the sidewalks is not cleared and this creates unsafe conditions. Some people are afraid to go outside in winter, and when they do, many have fallen and hurt themselves. People must resort to walking on the street with the cars.

#### **D. Coping and Supports**

Some people linked up with the Centre for Spanish-speaking People when they first came to Canada and found this organization very helpful. Several participants also received support from their families. Participants found it easy to access healthy, good quality food in the community (and generally speaking in Canada).

#### **E. Desired Resources and Services: Need for Information**

The Hispanic Seniors need better sources of information about current events, social issues, and politics in Canada. They want to know more about changes taking place in health care and education, for example. It can be difficult to obtain this type of information, as it is usually not provided in languages other than English or French. The one Latin American newspaper was described as “very bad”, in particular for its lack of political analysis of Canadian issues.

Other things that would help seniors are better drug benefits and higher incomes.

# Adults

**Parent-Child Drop-in Group**  
**May, 1997**  
**7 participants**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Recreation Centre**

Several participants reported that they and their children use the Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre. For example, some children take swimming lessons there. Also mentioned was career counselling offered at the recreation centre by the YMCA.

**Easy Access to Amenities**

The group agreed that the area was convenient for schools, parks, shopping, and public transportation.

**Neighbourhood Diversity: Cultural**

Lawrence Heights is seen as a multicultural community. “There are people of all races so you’re bound to find someone who either speaks your language or knows where you’re coming from.”

**Parkland and Outdoor Space**

There was an appreciation for the nice parks in the area and the open space. One woman reported taking her child to Baycrest Park, for example.

**Programs for Parent and Children**

Participants appreciated having programs such as the parent-child drop-in at the community health centre. “I personally like the fact that there’s a place where you can come with your kids and either take a break and meet with other people and find that you have some things in common with them, whether they’re problems or benefits, but you find that you’re not the only one in that situation.” Discussed later is the need for more programs and child care.

**Subsidies Available for Programs**

Subsidies for community programs were identified as a benefit. “If you’re on a low income you can get subsidy. That’s one of the things that I have taken advantage of and that’s great.” For example, North York Parks and Recreation provided a subsidy for children’s swimming lessons and for a parent-child program. “They don’t look down on you when you go to apply, so that’s good too. I’ve gone to places where you go for subsidy but you feel that everyone’s going to know or you feel kind of embarrassed. They [Parks and Recreation] made me feel like it’s no problem, you’re just like any one else.” The participant explained that without the subsidy, the cost would have prevented her and her children from participating.

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Crime and Safety**

Participants said they generally felt safe in the neighbourhood during the day. “During the day, it’s quiet, it’s nice.” “It’s like a different place in the day time.”

Safety was more of a concern at night: “Generally this area is not considered safe. They call it the jungle. It has a bad reputation . . . It’s not safe, not at night especially.” Participants reported knowing neighbours who have been robbed.

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Cancelled Programs**

One participant spoke of two programs in the community which she was looking forward to attending, but these were cancelled or delivered in a different format. The first program was a Friday evening drop-in for all ages. The second was a program for moms and tots where the parent would also be able to leave the child at the program for a few hours and do the weekly shopping. “That fell through because they said the age only started at 2½ and you had to work it out on your own with other moms, like on an exchange basis. That would take more effort.”

### **Children’s Safety Playing on the Street**

Parents were concerned about children’s safety when they are playing in the street. Often, cars drive by at very high speeds. Options to help solve this problem were discussed, such as trying to get a speed bump put in.

### **Communication Difficulties**

One participant who had lived in the community for only one year commented that sometimes “to communicate with other people is very hard.”

### **Concern About Youth and Their Behaviour**

Much discussion focussed on the behaviour of youth. It was felt that there was no place to turn to for help regarding the situation with youth.

“You can’t tell some kid you can’t be here, or don’t do that. Because you’re in danger if you do that. Because they’re going to get back at you. When you’re living with that fear, and you know that they have no respect for you, you feel like your hands are tied about doing things about situations. . . For example, kids come here and smoke dope. I personally would not go to them and tell them to stop. Because who knows what could happen to my house the day after. So it’s hard to know who to go to because you don’t go to the parents, you don’t go to their school. So who do you go to to get that controlled? You can see them fighting, you can see them doing things in front of your kids that aren’t decent. Who do you go to make them stop? You don’t go to them, you don’t go to the parents, you don’t go the school. So what do you do?”

It was felt that parents and other authority figures had little control over the behaviour of youth, and that many children and teenagers had too much freedom. “Unless you are lucky, they are not going to obey you. Because they have too much freedom. So they do whatever they like.”

### **Lack of Respect for Others**

Participants felt that many people do not have respect for others. “There’s a lot of people out there, not necessarily all adults or all teenagers, that there is no respect for others. So that’s going to cause chaos wherever you go.” Others agreed: “that’s a big problem.”

### **Police**

One participant who had a fight with a neighbour and went to the police for assistance was not satisfied with the help they provided. She felt this may have been because of her language [difficulties]. “The police said: go, go home. He didn’t ask nothing.” The group considered the police as one place to go for help in certain situations. However, they were discouraged by this participant’s experience: “It should be [a place to go for help] but when we hear like that, it seems hurting and embarrassing. So better to cry at home in the quiet.”

Another participant felt that he was not treated in a professional manner regarding a parking issue. While not wanting to generalize about the police, he did question whether there was racism involved. Or, he said, perhaps “it’s human behaviour. Some people are careless, some people are rude.”

### **Problems with Maintenance and Repairs**

Participants reported problems getting repair work done on their homes; sometimes it takes months for repairs to get done. One person felt there was a lot of bureaucracy involved. Someone else commented: “There’s a lot of government housing around here. I know people who have problems within their units or in their buildings. They’re not listened to by the housing authority. There’s not a lot of places that you can go for tenants complaints . . . You just have to be pushy, remind them. They say they’re busy. The manager says he already gave the order. Nobody knows to whom to complain.”

### **Public Transportation at Night**

The group agreed that transportation “used to be good” but is now “very, very, very bad” at night. This is because of reduced bus service. “They have cut the Varna bus at 7 o’clock.” Participants commented that it’s scary to walk to and from the subway, for example, “if somebody is going to work at eight or ten o’clock, or coming from work at around midnight.” They felt strongly that the buses should run until at least 2:00 a.m.

### **Racism and Racial Tensions**

One participant spoke of racism and some racial tensions in the neighbourhood. “There’s always little groups of different races that join up, so there’s going to be some tension between them . . . Some fights are due to that [race or culture]. Some problems with tenants escalate to that. It might be just a complaint between people but then they notice that they’re a different colour and they add that into the problem as well . . . You still have a lot of people who are not racist, who are not opinionated like that, so hopefully there’s more of this kind of people than the kind that are racist. But there always is, there is that type that because you’re not like them they won’t even talk to you. And if you look at them a certain way then -- why are you looking at me? But not a lot that I’ve experienced, because I tend to

portray that I don't care what colour you are." Additionally, she had been told that high schools students tend to stick with persons of similar cultural background, because they "feel protected." It was felt "it shouldn't be like that."

### **Youth and Crime**

In the neighbourhood, it was felt that "there's a lot of youth, a lot of older youth who are into causing trouble, who are into doing bad things. It's proven with things that happen, every week . . . There are drugs and drug involvement. There's a lot of youth who have nothing to do." It was mentioned that one did not know if the youth who were causing trouble lived in the neighbourhood or not.

One participant described crime among youth as a "national problem." While agreeing with this, someone else felt that "community by community should try and do something about it."

### **D. Coping and Supports**

The group identified friends, neighbours, and their mothers as people they go to for help or support when needed. "My mom lives close to me as well. I've met people who I have become friends with and we, community-wise, help out each other a little bit." For example, they help each other with "babysitting or maybe some kind of food."

### **E. Desired Resources and Services**

#### **Greater Availability of Child Care**

Participants expressed a need for more child care services. For example, the parent-child drop-in at the community health centre presently operates two days a week; they suggested it could be four days a week. Elsewhere, participants have experienced long waiting lists for day care and a lengthy application process. They discussed the need for subsidy. It was also mentioned that it can be stressful at home with children, and that children who stay at home are not as advanced as those who go to day care.

The group commented that not having child care can prevent people from working, looking for a job, or attending school or training. "There are many people who need to do something but they can't do it because of the children. There are the people who need to go to school, either for language or upgrading, and they can't do it." For example, one woman had to drop out of school because she did not have child care. Another could not take courses, even for a short period of two weeks, when she had been laid off for a few months. Participants agreed that "It would be great if the programs for skill training or the schools, once they provide the course, provided day care too. That would be great."

#### **Programs for Adults/Parents at Home with Children**

One woman felt there was a need for more community programs for women who are staying home with their children, such as art, sewing, and computers. She suggested these be flexible, free or low-cost, and could be offered two or three days a week for two hours. She described the potential benefits of these programs: "First of all, we can change our minds. Secondly, we can know each other. Thirdly, we get some knowledge."

### **Programs for Parents of Teenagers**

Participants were concerned about the behaviour of youth. Some outreach to parents was seen as one way to help with this problem: “If there could be some kind of community outreach to talk to the parents, because I don’t know what the parents think or where they are regarding their children. If there could be some kind of outreach so we could get to the hearts of these people, to get control. Although once it’s lost, once the kids are older, it’s hard to get. But I know that if there was this meeting, where they’re going to be talking to me about what my kid might be doing and they’re talking about how this hurts the community, I would be interested in stopping my child if I could, or at least doing something about it. But I don’t know if the parents are aware of what their kids are up to . . . Drugs, smoking, and their friends, stealing, and insulting and beating up. All that is going on all over this neighbourhood at night.”

### **Programs for Teenagers**

It was felt that youth needed more things to do; activities and structured time were seen as important. However, it was noted that it can be difficult to get teens to come to programs. Summer camp programs were seen as beneficial, as they would allow children and teenagers to leave the city for a short period of time. Counsellors who could offer help and advice were seen as necessary. Spending more hours in school was also seen as something that could help youth.

### **Programs for Young Children**

One woman felt that there were very few programs for children 4 and under.

**Spanish-Speaking Women's Group**  
**June, 1997**

**12 participants who have lived in Canada between 2 and 12 years**  
**Discussion carried out in English and Spanish (with translation)**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Health Centre (CHC)**

In terms of convenience and being close to home, the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre (LHCHC) was seen to be very accessible. Support groups were valued. A few participants in the group used the health centre for medical care. One woman described her experience with the health centre very positively: When she came to Canada, she was pregnant and did not have OHIP. The health centre provided care throughout her pregnancy and she continues to use the services of the health centre.

**B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

**Community Health Centre: Cultural Interpretation and Services in Spanish**

It was felt that service to the Spanish-speaking community was improved when cultural interpreters were made available and when Spanish-speaking service providers were hired at the health centre. Service in Spanish was seen as especially important in the reception area of the CHC. Before these services were available, participants told of having to pay for an interpreter, and going elsewhere to see a Spanish-speaking doctor. It was felt that the CHC should be supportive of the Spanish-speaking providers as they are the ones who voice concerns for community members.

One participant was surprised that someone had to pay for interpretation services. She felt strongly that all communities should have access to the same services. "Six years ago I know people who were working and who were paid by the government to translate. And you said you as a patient, you had to pay. I know in other areas where the government had the service, that they [the government] pay."

**Community Health Centre: Outreach**

While discussing the benefits of support groups at the CHC, the group commented that more promotion and publicity about CHC programs was needed in the community. Presently, most people get information about programs from flyers and from their neighbours. However, the women felt that there were still many people who did not know about the programs and that there were other Spanish-speaking women in the community who would come out if they were made aware of the health centre's programs. One woman said she lived in the neighbourhood for close to ten years before she found out about CHC programs.

**Community Health Centre: Sensitivity of Service Providers**

It was felt by a few participants that the quality of service received at the health centre varied depending on the cultural background of the service provider. Some Canadian-born service providers were seen to be more sensitive than persons from other backgrounds. This was viewed in terms of a larger issue of discrimination in the cultural communities.

## **Crime and Safety**

Feelings of safety varied among the group. Some of the women who lived in Lawrence Heights indicated that they do not feel safe in the neighbourhood. One woman reported security not coming when they are called. Those who lived outside of Lawrence Heights were more likely to say that they felt safe. “As far as I know, even though it’s a very cosmopolitan area, it’s safe.” This participant commented that she frequently hears of crime and safety concerns in other neighbourhoods, but less so in Lawrence Heights. However, she realized that she may be unaware of things that are going on as she lives outside of the immediate area. Another participant who lives outside of the neighbourhood has heard her son’s friends, who live in a primarily Italian neighbourhood, say they would never come to Lawrence Heights because they would not feel safe.

## **Health Care in Canada**

One participant compared Canadian health care to that of her country of origin. She felt that she had excellent health care in her country of origin. “I have four daughters, I have 100% of benefits, I went to the best hospital, everything was okay.” However, others commented that back home, you don’t get any care if you don’t pay. Accessibility to health care services also influenced the group to agree that the health care system in Canada is better than the U.S. system. “In the United States, if you want to go to the doctor, if you don’t have really good medical insurance, you don’t have any treatment.”

## **Neighbourhood Stores**

Participants appreciated having the Lawrence Square mall close by for shopping. They mentioned the supermarket and pharmacy, for example. Regarding convenience stores, it was noted that there were no convenience stores in Lawrence Heights, but there were many outside the immediate neighbourhood. Some participants who lived in Lawrence Heights reported that they would like to have a convenience store nearer to their homes. This is seen as especially important for parents with young children who often need to get things at night, and sometimes at the last minute. Others felt that convenience stores were not a good idea in a residential area because people would just hang around.

## **Neighbourliness**

Some participants described positive relationships with their neighbours, saying for example, that people are friendly and help each other. One woman described the help she received after having a stroke: “I live around here. A long time ago I had a stroke and when I wasn’t well they helped me carry my bags.” Others also said their relationships with neighbours were good. However, one complaint that neighbours seem to have is about noise from children. One participant felt she could not comment positively or negatively about her neighbours, as she did not interact with them very much. Still another participant had ongoing and serious problems with her neighbours that involved noise, drugs, and control of the building.

## **Parkland and Outdoor Space**

Parks and playgrounds in the area were seen as a good thing. It was felt that more playgrounds were needed in the neighbourhood. Also, while the playgrounds have many things for young children, it was felt that there should be more for older children. “Sometimes you want the big brother to go the playground with the little brother, but the older ones, they don’t want to go because there’s nothing [for

them to do].” Some participants had concerns about bringing their children to the parks because of the animals present. It was felt that some pet owners did not watch or control their pets.

### **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

#### **Availability of Child Care**

One participation mentioned difficulty accessing day care. She reported that for many years, for one reason or another, she has been refused day care.

#### **Community Health Centre: Access to Care**

Several participants told stories of not being able to access the services at the community health centre. For example, when one woman brought her daughter in with a high fever, she was told that her daughter was not sick enough to be seen right away. She took her daughter to the hospital. Another participant was told that they would not be able to see her child regarding an ear ache because they were too busy.

#### **Drugs**

Drug use in the neighbourhood was a concern. The participants reported there was a lot of drug use and drug dealing taking place outside, as well as in the buildings. One woman said youth smoking marijuana in front of her building contributes to her feelings of not being safe. The smoke also comes in her window. Another participant commented that her neighbour sells drugs.

#### **Garbage and Pollution**

Regarding the neighbourhood’s overall cleanliness, one participant described it as “clean, not like ten years ago, but still clean.” However she was dismayed by the amount of littering that takes place: “We can’t say that’s it’s completely clean because people don’t show the cooperation . . . We probably need some education and programs about littering.” Having only small garbage cans near bus stops was seen to contribute to the amount of littering. It was felt that more garbage cans might help to keep the neighbourhood clean. Others commented that the large garbage containers in front of the buildings do not look nice and are unhealthy.

#### **Health Care Delivery**

In addition to the services of the LHCHC, health care issues were discussed in more general terms. For example, long waits to see doctors were seen as a problem with all health care services. In terms of access to care in emergency situations, one participant commented: “It’s not just in this community. But it’s true, it’s very sad. These two young women they live just across the street. And they expect that in some emergency they have the health centre right there, and they don’t receive any care.” Also mentioned was that doctors are quick to write a prescription and “they don’t even listen to you.”

#### **Lack of Recreation Activities for Youth**

The group agreed that there are not enough recreation activities and facilities for youth. This was seen as unfair since other groups, such as older Italians, were known to have regular access to facilities. Teens are sometimes seen playing in the parking lots, from which they are usually kicked out.

Participants also commented on how the basketball nets are taken down in the summer, when they are most needed. The reason for taking these down is to discourage people from hanging around, however, participants did not see this as helpful. “They do it because they try to avoid having all the kids going there to do something that is not related to just playing basketball. But by trying to avoid they are making the problem with teenagers bigger.”

### **Lack of Space for Family Activities**

The group noted that there is limited access to low-cost facilities that can be used for family gatherings and events. “I live here for twelve years and I never make a party for my children.”

### **Maintenance of Buildings and Neighbourhood**

The group had concerns about the cleanliness and maintenance of the buildings. They said that the buildings were not clean and there were many bugs and cockroaches. Walls and appliances were also described as being in very bad shape. They remarked that while the rent is increased every year, maintenance is not improved.

One participant felt that there may be a relationship between the many newcomers in the neighbourhood and its overall cleanliness and maintenance. “If the landlord knows and if they don’t give the care to the buildings or the properties like they do to other cultures. Because probably the people like us we’re not ready to fight for our rights.” She felt that other housing developments where a similar rent is paid looked better than the Lawrence Heights area. Also, it was felt that some residents, including newcomers, did not take care of their community.

Poor snow removal was also seen as a problem. One woman reported that her husband had an accident because of this.

### **Physical Aspects of the Neighbourhood: Parking and Lighting**

Issues related to parking and lighting in the neighbourhood were raised. For some participants parking is far from where they live. This can cause difficulties in the winter, when with young children, and at night. It was felt that the neighbourhood is not well lit at night.

### **Process for Receiving Subsidies**

Participants commented on the difficulties they experience applying for subsidies for community programs. They described the process as bureaucratic and intimidating. It discourages them and affects their pride and self-esteem.

### **Racial Discrimination**

There was some discussion about experiences of racism and discrimination. For example, one woman felt that her son was discriminated against in a children’s hockey league because he is Hispanic and most of the other children were from the Caribbean. Some participants also felt that poor maintenance service may be linked to racial discrimination.

#### **D. Coping and Supports**

Friends who live close by, as well as the church and people in the parish, were identified as supports. The groups for Spanish-speaking women and seniors were also seen as helpful: “The best idea when you don’t have somebody close to you -- the community [health] centre. I really like Rosa Maria’s group on Tuesday . . . We have to support this group and help each other.”

#### **E. Desired Resources and Services**

More opportunities for low-cost recreation activities, including swimming and family activities, were desired.

Additional places to go swimming were desired by many participants. It was seen as especially important to have a wading pool for young children. People should be discouraged from bringing their pets to the pool.

It was felt that there should be more family programs accessible to those on low or limited income. Camping was mentioned as something they would like to do, but cannot on limited income. Places to hold family gatherings were also seen as important.

Some participants also spoke of a need for more day care and programs to control drug use.

**Tamil Women's Group #1**  
**August, 1997**

**4 participants who have lived in Canada between 3 to 6 years**  
**Discussion carried out in English and Tamil with translation**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Local Schools**

Several of the schools in the community were identified as being positive factors. One woman described it as a real gift to have a nice school for her daughter. The school she was referring to is Regina Mundi, the Catholic school. She said that they give extra care to new arrivals and provide ESL and one-to-one attention to her daughter, who is in grade 6.

Another woman has a child in grade 1 at Joyce school. This school received an excellence award, and it was agreed that everyone at the school is really good. The women liked the fact that their children get to mix with children from other cultures, and the school feels safe. When the issue of racism in the schools was raised, the group replied that it is not really an issue with the younger children; again, that the teachers are very good, but that as the children get older, racism becomes a more difficult issue for all to deal with.

**North York Community House: Meeting Social Needs**

For these women, the North York Community House (NYCH) is definitely seen as a good thing. One of the reasons why it is an important place for these women is its capacity to bring them together. The story was told that even though two of the women had been living in the same building, they didn't know each other until they started coming to NYCH. They all described NYCH as a very safe environment where people can get to know each other over time. As an example of the accessibility of NYCH, one woman mentioned that if a person were landing from Sri Lanka one day, she could join activities at NYCH the very next day.

NYCH helps the women avoid the isolation that can happen if they stay at home all day, every day. The community kitchen and parent-child drop-in provide an opportunity to get out of the house and socialize while their husbands are at work. They felt that their young children also benefit from the social activity and exposure to English when they come to the centre.

**North York Community House: Provides Needed Services**

In addition to the community kitchen and parent-child drop-in mentioned above, the Community House also provides English as a Second Language classes (ESL). The women said that the ESL classes were good; that they were delivered in a relaxed fashion.

If the women have any problems, NYCH is the first place they turn to for help, and NYCH will make referrals as necessary, depending upon the type of problem. Finally, the fact that the services at NYCH are free of charge is very much appreciated by this group of women.

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Access to Child Care**

The women said that while there were two day cares in the neighbourhood, they are overcrowded and have long waiting lists.

### **Access to Health Care**

There was some discussion of the health care options that the women have used. The Community House makes referrals to Lawrence Heights and Black Creek Community Health Centres. One woman had attended pre-natal classes at Lawrence Heights CHC. Another commented that she was not aware of the services offered at Lawrence Heights, other than the pre-natal classes. The women said they would go to an Emergency department if their children had a high fever, ear infection or eye problem.

Some of the group reported having Tamil doctors. If not, then family members would go with them to help with translation. The women agreed that they prefer seeing female doctors. Most of the Sri Lankan doctors are female, but the Tamil-speaking gynecologist some of the women see in Scarborough is male.

### **Concerns Regarding the Needs of Seniors**

The group discussed the fact that while they themselves face a major barrier due to their language, the impact of this barrier on the lives of seniors is most pronounced. Seniors are only able to participate within their own community. They tend to stay at home, especially in winter. Some have even gone back to Sri Lanka. The seniors who are here live with their families and with the assistance of family benefits. The group remarked that their culture doesn't support the idea of putting parents into "seniors' homes".

### **North York Community House: Limited Resources to Meet Community Need**

While NYCH provides some excellent programs and services to the Tamil community, it does not always have the resource capacity to respond to the expressed needs of the community. For example, the women would like to have sewing classes and NYCH tried to provide these classes but could neither get enough volunteers to run them nor maintain enough funding to cover costs. Any of the money that might have gone toward the support of sewing programs now goes towards, for example, computer-related costs.

In terms of computer training, there is a resource centre at NYCH with volunteers who assist. But, according to the women, this is not enough. They felt that they need a real teacher. Apparently, this has been a request from the community for a long time.

The women referred to the difficulty of getting a job in Canada without Canadian qualifications and/or work experience. The example of cake icing was used: that even if a person had a certificate in cake icing from Sri Lanka, employers want a Canadian certificate. And, although NYCH has offered training in cake icing, it cannot grant certificates.

Also, NYCH is trying to provide heritage classes for the Tamil children. At the moment, one of the women who came to the centre for ESL instruction has taken on the heritage teaching. The children provide some donation to her because there is no funding to pay for her services. Funding is only available when the number of students becomes large enough. So the situation is unstable.

## **Parks and Recreation**

The group said that their children tend to play in three parks: Joyce Park, the park at Dufferin and Lawrence, and the school park. They felt that it was great to have access to these parks in the summer, but felt that in the winter there is no recreation available.

There are some programs, such as dance at the Amesbury recreation centre, and the Summer Fun Centre at Regina Mundi, but both of these cost money. According to these women, it is important that programs be free of charge or very low cost.

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Closing of the Local Hospital**

The group was very concerned about the closing of Keele Hospital. They will have to travel far for a hospital.

### **Crime and Safety**

None of the women had personally experienced safety-related problems, but they reported that the building security guard is only on duty until 4:30 pm and that after that time, cars have been broken into, vandalized and/or stolen; management does not respond to these issues. They have also heard of others who have had break-ins at their apartments.

### **Lack of Nearby Tamil Programs and Services**

The women voiced concerns that there are not enough nearby recreational programs available for their children, such as piano lessons and cultural dance. In order for their children to take piano classes, most take their children to Scarborough for private classes with Tamil teachers. And, parents have to pay for these classes.

The women also expressed dislike for the fact that most Tamil doctors are far away. It takes them the whole day to go to the doctor, considering transit time and waiting for their appointment.

### **Poor Access to Affordable Shopping**

The group felt that both the local convenience stores and the large groceries, such as Dominion, are expensive. But, at the same time, they felt that travelling to less expensive stores did not offer much of a solution, because the stores are far away and getting to them is not easy, especially in winter.

### **Poor Maintenance and Condition of Buildings**

The women complained that their buildings are poorly maintained. These buildings (at Caledonia Village) are, in fact, condominiums that are privately owned and neither the individual owners nor management do much to maintain or repair the buildings. The women said that there is a lack of cleaning, and there are cockroaches and rats. Repairs have to be done by the tenants themselves.

### **Racial Discrimination**

The women have faced some racial comments from other ethno-cultural group(s). There was one incident at NYCH during a sewing class when they were told that they didn't belong there. But, overall, they agreed that there are few overt displays of racist behaviour directed solely at Sri Lankans in their

daily lives. They did say that young gangs, who hang out and drink in the parking lot during the evening, will use racial comments directed against any number of racial groups.

### **C. Coping and Supports**

When asked where they might go in the community if they needed help with a problem, the North York Community House and the referrals they can provide were the main supports mentioned.

### **D. Desired Resources and Services for the Tamil Community**

#### **Convenient and Affordable Shopping**

The women would like closer access to grocery stores that offer lower prices.

#### **Tamil Programs and Services**

They would also like improved access to Tamil-speaking programs and services for themselves and their children. It was said that the need for Tamil services is more important for the women than the men, since men are compelled to become conversant enough in English to cope in the working world.

#### **Training for Jobs**

The women were eager to learn skills that could help them to get a job. As it is, few women in the Tamil community become trained for employment. Yet, one commented that even for a factory sewing job, some employers look for five years of sewing experience and some of them also demand computer skills. And for those women who go to work during the day, it is important that ESL classes and/or employment-related training be offered during the evenings.

They said that they would like: a real computer class with instructors who could start at the beginning; sewing classes; and training like COSTI provides. One of the group had gone to COSTI, but for some it's too fast and they can't cope and they return to NYCH. Also, COSTI charges for some of its programs, such as English above level three, and summer computer classes.

#### **Tutorial Help for Children**

Regarding their children's needs, the group felt that the services for older children (i.e., Grade 7 and higher) should include tutorial help during after-school hours, in either English or Tamil. This is necessary because many parents are unable to help their children with their studies as the academic materials become more complex and require more advanced English skills.

**Tamil Group #2  
September, 1997**

**5 participants who have lived in Canada between 1 and 5 years  
Discussion carried out in English and Tamil with translation**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Affordable Housing**

The participants, and many members of the Tamil community, are living in rented condominium units. The rents were described as being affordable, and some of the condominium owners were described as acting responsibly as owners. However, there were a number of negative factors associated with these units (see section C.).

**Community Agencies and Resources**

In addition to North York Community House (NYCH), discussed separately below, COSTI was identified as a helpful resource in the community.

**The Local School**

The neighbourhood elementary school, Joyce Public, was seen as a very good school by all participants. The following reasons why it is good were given: because the principal and staff communicate with the parents; the school has good programs; and teachers provide one-to-one attention when needed. People want to stay in the area because of this school.

**North York Community House: Meeting Social Needs**

The group felt very fortunate to have North York Community House in the neighbourhood. They like the fact that it is very close to their homes - within walking distance - and it provides a very comfortable environment for meeting. In fact, they said that many of them met and got to know each other through NYCH. They mentioned the community kitchen, ESL, and parent-child drop-in, as the services they tend to access most at NYCH.

**North York Community House: Provides Needed Services**

Whether it's to participate in a program, or to get information about, for example, social assistance, they come first to the NYCH for help and support with many issues. NYCH provides free services and also employs a Tamil-speaking worker; both of these aspects are very important to the group.

**B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

**Access to Day Care**

There are two day cares nearby, but the women said that the waiting list is very, very long. While the service does cost money, there is a subsidy available through Metro. Those who had children in day care were happy with the care provided.

## **Access to Health Services**

The group described a variety of approaches to seeking health care depending upon the specific need. For example, while the women would go to the local community health centre for pre-natal care, in more urgent cases, such as an ill child, they would go to the nearby walk-in clinics, even though the doctors are English-speaking. If it is a more involved medical issue, they would go to Scarborough or downtown to see a Tamil doctor.

## **Changing Roles: Cultural Norms and Linguistic Barriers**

There was a discussion about the traditional cultural norms regarding women and work and how it is a big issue. The participants described how, in Sri Lankan urban centres, not many women go to work; only men go as the bread winners. There can be some shame or stigma attached if the family sends the woman to work, though this is not true everywhere. But here, because of the language barrier, there is an added problem for women if they want to compete in the mainstream. And, generally, the women want to learn English and computer skills and do something. Some of the participants in the group were coming to the NYCH for English; none of them were working. Men tend to develop better English skills than women in order to compete in the world. Also, women were described as tending to feel more shy.

## **Mobility**

For the women, mobility, or the lack of it, was mentioned as being problematic. Because of the responsibilities they have vis-a-vis home and children, they stressed the need to have learning and/or work opportunities nearby in order to be able to accommodate all of their responsibilities.

## **Parks**

All of the members of the group enjoy going to parks with their children or grand children. The group felt that “it is a gift to have even one park”, but they remarked that there are not many facilities at the park closest to their homes, which is Joyce Park. For example, there is no water fountain. Also, they would like more play equipment at Joyce Park. They go to Dufferin Park for better facilities. There's also an open space behind their buildings, but it's just “a blank space” - not really a park.

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Closing of the Local Hospital**

The group was very concerned that the possible closing of Keele Hospital would mean that they would have to go a long distance in case of an emergency or for services such as maternal care. They felt it was important to have access to health care in their neighbourhood.

### **Crime and Safety**

The group expressed the feeling that the security at their buildings is inadequate and they don't feel very safe. They noted how the security guard is not always there and that there have been some break-ins. They thought that there are precautions one could take that would reduce the chances of becoming a victim. But, one person commented that there are some people in the community who are interested in perpetrating crimes in the neighbourhood.

### **Lack of After-School Programs for Children**

Generally, the group was concerned about the lack of after school program opportunities, such as computer classes, for children in the neighbourhood. There are some facilities in their buildings, but they said that these facilities are not really for children.

### **Poor Access to Affordable Shopping**

The group complained about the difficulties in accessing appropriate outlets for groceries. They noted that while there are some local convenience stores, they are few in number, expensive, and limited in the selection they offer. The larger grocery stores are better in terms of price and selection, but they are far away.

### **Poor Maintenance and Condition of Buildings**

There were strong criticisms regarding the tendency for many of the condominium owners to ignore the need for repairs and maintenance in the units. A number of participants agreed that repairs in the units are never done. They all complained that, generally, the building management doesn't care; that there are cockroaches; and the elevators are slow. It seems that any repairs performed by the management are done at its discretion: some repairs are done right away, but not others. Also, there are heating problems in the winter: there are no thermostats in the units and it gets so hot that the tenants open the windows. One person suggested that this was responsible for people getting sick more than they should. One added that it is difficult to organize a tenants' association.

### **Lack of Nearby Tamil Programs and Services**

Apart from the NYCH, the group described some problems in accessing Tamil-speaking services. As mentioned, they must go to Scarborough or downtown, where there are larger Tamil communities, in order to see a Tamil-speaking doctor. It is also the case that there are no Tamil legal services in the neighbourhood. If they are in need of legal services they are referred to Downsview Legal Services or Broadview where they can get services in Tamil.

## **D. Coping and Supports**

The North York Community House was identified as the primary source of support for the Tamil community. Specifically mentioned were the NYCH's programs, the support of the Tamil-speaking worker, the fact that services are free, and the referrals that are made when necessary.

## **E. Desired Resources and Services for the Tamil Community**

### **Tamil Programs and Services**

Language is a very real barrier for this group. Until they advance with their English skills, the participants in the group said they would feel more comfortable if there were more information and/or services available to them in Tamil. They commented that the Tamil community is growing in size.

They would like more classes offered, both for themselves and their children, such as computer classes with instructors. The women would also like sewing classes.

**Somali Women's Group #1**  
**July, 1997**

**5 participants who have lived in Canada between 7 and 11 years**  
**Discussion carried out in English and Somali with translation**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Access to Amenities**

The group listed a number of conveniences in their neighbourhood, including access to shopping, the subway, schools, banks, and the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre. As well, they agreed that they have good access to sources for their traditional foods. Some food is delivered from other neighbourhoods; they also purchase food from Kosher stores.

**Community Health Centre (CHC): Proximity**

The women liked the fact that the CHC is very close by. This makes it very convenient when their children get sick. They commented that the people at the CHC are very nice and they like the staff very much.

**The Local Primary School**

The women were very pleased that the local primary school is so close to their homes. This allows them to escort their children back and forth from school which means that they do not have to worry about their children's safety. In addition, they had no complaints about the classes or the teachers.

**B. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

**Community Health Centre: Access to Doctors**

While access to the CHC was viewed positively, the group felt that there are not enough doctors and the waiting lists are long. The doctors are available by appointment, but if there is an emergency, it is difficult to get in to see the doctor. They described the protocol as follows: "You see the nurse first and she's very nice but they [the doctor and the nurse] aren't the same thing; the nurse can't write a prescription. You feel secure when you see a doctor." They went on to say that this is especially true for older persons, they want to see a doctor. Also mentioned was that all of the doctors are English-speaking which creates communication problems.

**Concern for Children's Safety: Impact on Children and the Family**

A great deal of anxiety was expressed about Somali children's safety and the influence of the larger community on children. The women are afraid for their children's safety, and that they might take on the bad habits that they see around them. For this reason, these women feel they have to watch over their children closely, or keep them in the house. However, they recognize the importance of children playing outside and enjoying themselves, and that for the children being inside all the time is "like being in jail." The parents feel stressed, worrying about the bad influence of others and about their children being hurt. Meanwhile, the kids are constantly angry because they are kept inside: they live in isolation and

there are constant conflicts between parents and children. Everyone agreed that this is true. And they added that if both the children and parents are frustrated, then it's bad for the whole family.

Safety concerns influence other aspects of daily life as well. For example, even though the older children (Grade 4 and up) attend a more distant school than the younger children, parents pick them up, take them home, and return them to the school during the school's half hour break time, regardless of the inconvenience. A problem mentioned with keeping the children inside is that the neighbours may be disturbed and might complain. Also mentioned related to children's safety: they know that if they get a nice pair of shoes, like Nikes, for their children, other children will steal them. And, then they feel that they cannot report such an incident because they don't want to draw attention to themselves and invite more trouble.

### **Crowded Living Conditions**

Many Somalis have large families but they can't get a large enough unit. So, for example, nine people live in a two bedroom apt. This was viewed as being bad for their health. But, they said the waiting list for larger units is long. Their types of units were not designed for their cultural norms but, again, they said that they have to be quiet about the situation and not complain. They don't want to be seen as complainers.

### **Cultural Differences: Conflicts with Neighbours**

It was agreed that attitudes that the Somalis and their neighbours hold about each other's behaviours reflect, and are aggravated by, their cultural differences. They felt that there is fear of the unknown in evidence from both sides. The women believe that others have an animosity against them because they are different. They felt that others in their neighbourhood are ignorant about the Somalis. Concern was expressed that the Somalis don't do anything to create problems, but it is the Somalis who feel constantly under attack. They suggested that another reason why there are some strained relations with neighbours may result from the fact that when Somalis move into Metro housing units that have been vacated by those evicted for drug use, it is perceived as "Somalis taking over the neighbourhood."

One woman expressed the view that cultural communities should not be mixed. At least members of the same group understand each other. Back home, in Somalia, they say, people are safe, and children know everyone. There are no drugs, and people don't worry that their child could be abducted.

### **Environment and Pollution Issues**

In terms of air quality, the women felt that the air outside is polluted and a health hazard. They also did not appreciate finding dog 'poo poo' on their lawns and felt that this too is bad for their health.

### **High School's Expectations of Parents**

The group described how some parents who have high school age children feel that they are expected by the principal to help their children with their school work so that they can catch up to the others in their classes. But, these parents cannot provide that kind of help. They feel that the school does not understand their issues. Further, they said that there's nowhere to go for help with these matters.

### **Intolerance, Harassment and Abuse: Incidents**

The group described how they experience stress due to neighbours who make fun of the way they dress or talk, and who also have been known to throw bottles and objects at them. There have also been instances where objects have been thrown into their houses and damaged their windows. One woman told of people who come and knock on the door and then run away. On one occasion, she caught the young person who had done it and took him to his mother. But the mother ended up fighting with her and reporting it to the police. There was also an incident where one's son was playing in the playground and another child hit him with a bottle in the face by the eyes and it required 6 stitches. Three children were responsible for this assault and nothing has been done about it.

### **Intolerance, Harassment and Abuse: Lack of Response**

There was the feeling that no one cares about their concerns in Lawrence Heights. Reports are written, but nothing happens. They felt that neither the management, the police nor community agencies support them in these concerns. At their buildings, security doesn't do anything about the kids doing drugs. It was felt that the security people themselves are afraid of the youth and they advise the families to keep their children inside.

### **Parks**

The group commented that the neighbourhood parks are not large enough.

### **Poor Condition and Maintenance of Buildings**

The conditions of their buildings were described as unhealthy. Generally, they felt that Metro Housing could do a better job of looking after the buildings and the area. They believe that improving the quality of life requires improving the quality of the neighbourhood.

### **Smoking, Alcohol and Drug Use**

The group talked about the difficulties they have coping with some of the behaviours they see in their neighbourhood. They don't appreciate, or don't find acceptable, drinking and smoking. Some of their neighbours smoke and do drugs and leave their alcohol bottles in the lobby. They view this as a health hazard in that it is a negative presence and bad influence, especially for their children. All of the women shared this perspective. They described those who are doing drugs and hanging around as being mainly between the ages of 10 and 17 years old.

Some of the women felt that over the past three years, the neighbourhood has become less safe; that neighbours who use drugs have moved in. But others suggested that this type of problem has always been there, but they (the Somalis) are more aware of it because their children are older now and at greater risk for involvement.

## **C. Desired Resources and Services for the Somali Community**

### **Community Health Centre Services**

Regarding services at the community health centre, the group voiced several desires. They said they would like a place at the CHC where they can practice their heritage and their children could learn English and play with other kids, so they could feel like the centre is for them. They would like an office in the health centre and a Somali staff person they can identify with; one who could help them access services such as immigration. That way, they would be more comfortable and feel a part of the health centre.

### **ESL, Sewing and Cooking Programs**

The women would like access to several types of programs, for example: sewing, community kitchens, and ESL. They want to continue with their education. Most have graduated from high school and have children - at least 4 children each - so they need access to day care in order to take classes. They felt that, in terms of priorities, they need ESL first, and training in the area of community kitchens, and sewing because of their low income. That is, they need skills like sewing to do their own clothes, and learning to cook nutritious food inexpensively.

### **Parks**

They would like to have a greater number and/or larger park spaces available.

### **Tutoring for Children**

They would also like tutoring for their children. Some of the school age kids who don't speak English had come to the health centre to request tutoring and they were told that something would be done, but they didn't receive any help. If they could organize something to help the children that would be great. Any of the other places that offer tutoring cost too much.

**Somali Women's Group #2  
October, 1997**

**9 participants who have lived in Canada between 2 to 8 years  
(a few had also participated in July 30 discussion)  
Discussion carried out in English and Somali with translation**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Access to Amenities**

The group listed a number of conveniences in their neighbourhood, including access to shopping, the subway, schools, and the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, specifically for the health services it provides for themselves and their children.

**B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

**Sense of Community**

Within the Somali community itself there is a sense of belonging and a feeling of comfort. One woman who had returned to the neighbourhood said she appreciates the familiarity she feels here. Another commented that having Somali neighbours means you don't have to worry about your children; that is, you would trust them with your Somali neighbours even if you don't really know them. Others agreed with this statement.

However, one woman suggested that if you don't have the basics of a healthy community like security or good health facilities, it doesn't matter that you're living within your own cultural community. That is, living within her own community was not viewed as the top priority relative to other needs.

**C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

**Community Health Centre: Poor Access to Doctors**

All of the women reported visiting the local community health centre for medical services. However, they noted that the doctors are English-speaking which creates communication problems. There is no Somali interpreter available. Moreover, while they felt that the doctors are very good, they also said there were not enough of them. This is a large community, but they reported that there is only one permanent doctor. It can take two to three weeks to get an appointment to see a doctor. Or, as a new client, it can take as much as four months to get an appointment. They indicated that they would have to travel far if they really needed to see someone. If it were urgent, they would go to Emergency.

**Concern for Children's Safety**

The women are very concerned about the safety of their children in the community. There is concern that their children get into fights with others in the neighbourhood, and at school during recess. Bicycles and nice (Nike) shoes have been stolen from their young children. So, they are left feeling that all you can do is keep their children at home, in order to keep them safe.

**Crime and Safety**

In general, these women do not feel safe. Many Somali women are single mothers, and they are always worried for themselves and their children. They attribute some of the problem to the high density living situation that they are in, and reported that even places like Pizza Hut won't deliver because they don't feel safe.

Vandalism, such as breaking windows is a problem. But, they said that if they report such incidents to security staff, there is no response. And, they can't call the police unless they go through security.

### **Crowded Living Situations**

It was felt that housing is inadequate, with families being overcrowded in one unit. For example, one person mentioned 10 persons living in a 2 bedroom unit. One woman has a 3 month old child and they live in the living room of their unit.

### **Discrimination, Unemployment and Stress**

These women and their children do experience racism. They are criticized for the way they dress. They told of how, back in Somalia, they could have had their own businesses, but here they are discriminated against because of the way they look. So, they feel that it is harder for them to find jobs here. But, if they could get decent work, they could move out of their present living conditions. They find that life is stressful every day.

### **Drug Use and Smoking**

The women felt that too many people in the neighbourhood are smokers, and many of them are teens. They also view drug use as a big problem in the community. They believe that drug use has increased over the past few years.

### **Poor Maintenance and Condition of Buildings**

There was agreement that, in general, the condition and maintenance of the buildings is poor. Repairs are not adequately attended to. Only one participant said that some repairs are done quickly; that it depends on the availability of the parts or items required for the repair.

## **C. Coping and Supports**

When asked where they might go in the community for help with a problem, the women generally expressed the feeling there was nowhere to turn to. They thought they might speak to someone at the community health centre. But they have problems accessing services because they are not available in the Somali language.

## **D. Desired Resources and Services for the Somali Community**

### **Child Care**

Child care services close to home are needed. If these women are to be able to study or train, there has to be child care available. They said that there are not schools in the community where they can leave their children in child care while they take ESL classes. Any programs that do offer child care have long waiting lists.

### **Community Health Centre: More Support and Accessible Medical Care**

It was felt that the community health centre should be more active in providing support to the Somali community. They would also like to have more doctors so they could see them more quickly and have translation available if the doctors are not Somali.

### **Recreation**

The participants expressed a need for more recreation activities. They would like there to be a youth centre for the children, and they would like some activities for themselves, like exercise classes.

### **Security**

They want better security; that is, a security guard who will respond. They reported that one time there were children playing outside and fighting and security wouldn't help. It was felt that security is afraid of some families.

### **Somali Worker/Facilitator**

The women see a need for a spokesperson who could represent them in this community; someone who they could turn to with their problems.

### **Training and Jobs**

This group of women wants training in English and basic skills. Further, they want hands-on training for jobs, for example, computers, sewing, or cashier, and more access to jobs.

### **Tutoring and Heritage Classes for Children**

The women feel that their children don't get enough help in school. One said there should be separate classes with tutoring help in ESL, and others agreed. They would also like heritage classes on the weekends for their children to learn about the Somali culture.

**Somali Men's Group**  
**August, 1997**

**8 participants who have lived in Canada approximately 6 years**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**Community Health Centre**

The community health centre (CHC) was mentioned as a positive aspect of the neighbourhood. It was specifically spoken of in terms of its role as “a medical centre.” The participants noted that medical care is the main reason they visit the CHC: “They come for the doctors and nurses. There are other resources, but people don’t get them.” People who work at the health centre, such as the reception staff and the nurses, were seen as being very helpful.

While it was acknowledged that the CHC provides space when it is needed, it was felt that the CHC could also offer other sources of help. However, the participants also commented that it can be difficult for Somali residents to connect with the health centre, and moreover, many are not aware of the CHC’s health promotion component. “They just know it from the health aspect.”

**Economic Security**

Economic security was outlined as an important aspect that makes for good quality of life. Economic security allows a father to take care of his family and children. Having a decent income provides security and “at the same time contributes to the overall health of the family.” Many Somali men are working, but they are not working at the jobs they were trained in. The men in this group were previously teachers, mechanics, students, and a pilot. These men had all arrived in Canada in the early 1990's.

**Family and Community Involvement**

Families were seen as an important means of support. It was felt that people should also take part in the community. But community involvement can often be difficult for the Somali community -- people are either busy looking for work or going to school. Additionally, some Somalis were seen as being isolated and frequently staying at home.

**Hospitality of Canadians**

The hospitality of Canadians in accepting Somalis and allowing them to live here was appreciated. “Our country has been destroyed. There has been a civil war and we are thankful.” As compared to what life would have been life without food, shelter, medical attention, it is much better. “It’s good, but . . .”

**Safety**

Safety was mentioned as another aspect of a neighbourhood that provides a sense of security and well-being.

## **B. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Concern About the Future**

One participant expressed concern about the future. He was worried that if people failed to get employment they might turn away from the values they had been brought up with. Religion was seen as a barrier against this.

### **Crime and Safety**

There were some concerns about vandalism. Some of this involved people throwing stones. This was seen as involving “troublemakers.” The men did not feel that they got much help from the police.

### **Distance to Mosque**

All of the men were Moslem but there were no nearby mosques. To visit one would take half an hour by bus.

### **Education Issues**

It was felt that Somali children were not getting a proper education in local schools. The group reported that there are at least 400 to 500 young Somali children in the community, but they felt that the schools were not understanding of their needs. It was felt that these children needed someone to guide them, someone who understood them and would help them join the mainstream of the community. “They attend the school, but there is not even one Somali man or woman teacher involved in the school. Not even a caretaker.”

### **Housing Conditions: Overcrowding**

There was lively discussion around housing issues. The group noted that Somali families tend to be large families, and their housing conditions are very crowded. Some had been on waiting lists for a very long time: “I lived here five years, and have been on a waiting list for two years to have a larger area.” Most Somali families were seen as being underhoused. Housing that would be appropriate was seen as being too expensive.

### **Housing Conditions: Poor Maintenance and Repairs**

It was also felt that the maintenance of housing had deteriorated within the past few years. “The maintenance is poor. The last three years it’s been very poor.”

### **Language Barriers**

It was mentioned that while many Somali men are able to speak English, only some women can.

### **Limited Employment Opportunities**

Limited opportunities for employment was seen as the most pressing issue facing Somalis. Many have not been able to attain the kind of work they had prior to arriving in Canada. It was pointed out that “We have medical doctors, surgeons, family doctors, biologists, who are now working as taxi drivers, security guards or gas pumpers.” Others agreed: “Most of the Somalis who came and who live in this area have professions. They have skills. But there is very little opportunity.”

Because of underemployment or unemployment, many Somalis are not able to earn a decent wage. It does not allow them to meet the needs of their families and children. Moreover, the inability to use their knowledge and skills had led to frustration and depression. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for them to receive Canadian certification in their professions. The participants were concerned that this affects their children, as “the children cannot see their parents as role models. They cannot see the importance of education.”

### **Police: Unresponsive**

It was felt that the police were not very responsive or helpful. They did not appear to take complaints seriously.

### **Problems of Adjustment**

The Somali community was seen as the most recent arrivals to Canada. As a group they have many differences in background compared to others who have lived here longer. These differences, in “culture, religion, and education”, are seen as barriers to adjusting to Canadian life.

### **Safety at the Recreation Centre**

There is concern about safety, especially of children, at the recreation centre. It was felt that because there was no one who spoke their language, the Somali children could not be properly supervised. There was also concern about drug dealing. It was felt that some youth resent Somali youth “because they are new to the neighbourhood, others are saying you are encroaching in our property.”

## **C. Coping and Supports**

When asked what they do to cope with problems, the men said that medical issues would be dealt with by going to the community health centre. Related to safety issues they would call 911. They were aware of Somali agencies but these were “all far away in the west end, in Etobicoke.” They were more likely to depend upon informal contacts; “call this guy or that guy.” If there was a serious issue they would go west or east or downtown for help. “Something closer would be better.”

## **D. Desired Resources and Services**

### **Building Linkages with Community Agencies**

It was felt that there are few linkages between the Somalis and community agencies such as the community health centre. The Community Quality of Life Project was seen as a useful way to build these linkages. “Just like, you came up with the idea to call the women and then the men, discussing how to get the community involved. I am glad, it opens a door. When the women came here they had say of how they see things.” Without this opportunity, it was felt that Somali residents would not have come out. The group suggested that if someone at the health centre “goes out and talks to the people, they can organize some community involvement. People will discuss things and this is the only way they can solve their problems.”

### **Local Services and Resources**

Currently Somali residents need to go downtown, or to the end or west ends of the city, for many services in their language. It would be helpful if there were some services nearby.

### **Need for Communication Channels**

There was discussion around the need to open up channels of communication among Somali residents. Currently, the informal networks sometimes fail to deal with issues. People are busy with their problems and taking care of their own families. And making connections takes time -- “Even if I think of a problem, I may get lazy about calling a meeting.” They suggested that if there was a staff person at the community health centre who knew the Somali community, that person “would have the ability and strategies to solve the problems.”

### **Need for Community Outreach**

It was felt that there is a need for information and outreach to the Somali community. Participants described that in order to learn English or sewing, to go to the health centre, or even to enjoy the recreation centre, some connections need to be made. Presently, “the connection is not there.” Concretely, it was felt that the community health centre could disseminate information to the community, perhaps by having “outreach workers to get the information out, hold events, and open doors.” They also commented: “They need to see someone there from the community. It’s like public relations. This is the only way to bring people in, to make connections. They will get more involved. They will talk more.”

### **Need for Somali Representation in Community Agencies**

Related to the need for building linkages and outreach is the desire to have Somali representatives for the community. “If we get one or two people involved with one of the centres, that person who lives here and knows the people, that someone could get information out.” They suggested that perhaps someone on the board of directors [of the community health centre] could be Somali. This would help to form connections between the CHC and the community.

At the recreation centre, a Somali person could teach sports, such as basketball. This was important as it was felt that Somali children “will be champions tomorrow.” They should be “connected with other people, connected to the society; they will be the future of the society.”

### **Women’s Education Needs**

There were some specific education needs that were identified. It was felt that Somali women had particular needs for English as a Second Language and practical skills such as using sewing machines. But even when classes are available, it is difficult for Somali women to attend them. “It doesn’t mean they are not interested in school.” They need transportation and/or day care to allow them to attend since Somali women may have many children.

### **Eastern European Group**

**October, 1997**

**6 participants who have lived in Canada between 2 weeks and 3 years**

**Discussion carried out in English and Russian with translation**

### **A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

### **Good Neighbours and Neighbourhood**

A number of the participants lived in the Steeles Avenue and Bathurst Street area. Adding to the their positive feelings about the neighbourhood being clean and safe was the experience of knowing their neighbours. They also liked the fact that the neighbourhood consists of a combination of owner-occupied houses and apartments. At least one participant mentioned “quiet neighbours” as a plus.

### **Jewish Community Centre**

Several of the participants used services available to newcomers through the Jewish Community Centre at Sheppard and Bathurst.

### **Parks and Recreation**

The group agreed that the community where they live is very clean and they enjoy the parks and playgrounds. One mentioned that private classes in traditional dance are available through a local Ukrainian group, and has a daughter taking these classes. They also noted the availability of entertainment, sports, and many activities in general. They agreed that it is very important that children have a place to play that is safe.

### **Safety**

All agreed that feeling safe is very important for newcomers. While one of the men prefaced his remarks by noting that “there is no such thing as 100% safety”, he and the other participants agreed that they generally feel very safe in their neighbourhood. One participant suggested that he feels that downtown is not as safe as their neighbourhood. One female newcomer - here for only 2 months - compared her life here to her life in Moscow: she feels safer here and feels that her 10 year old daughter will have greater freedom than in Moscow. At least one member of the group was aware that a car had been stolen - likely by teenagers - but the person went on to comment: “that's life”. It was not of great concern and did not seem to interfere with the overall sense of a safe community.

### **Sense of Community and Support from Persons with Similar Cultural Background**

The group emphasized that one of the good things about living in the neighbourhood is that there are other Eastern Europeans living there. In fact, all of the participants settled in this neighbourhood because they had friends who were there already. A woman from Romania commented that she has Romanian friends living in her building, and this was the main reason for coming to this community. They all felt that as newcomers, it is important to live in an area with others who share your culture and language so there is help and advice when you need it, for example, to access services and make day-to-day living easier in the new culture. It was also noted that they are more likely to find work through contacts in their own cultural/language group.

### **Services Available in the Language of Origin**

The participants noted that there are a number of local services available in their own language such as Russian shops, a drugstore, and video store. They again expressed the importance of encountering others who share their own language at, for example, the bank or grocery store, in order to cope more easily with day-to-day life. Also, they all have Russian-speaking family doctors.

## **B. Neutral or Contested Issues**

### **Community Centres**

While the group appreciates the services provided by the Jewish Community Centre (JCC), it is the only nearby centre accessed by this group. And, the group felt that while it had some services to offer, it doesn't have all of the services required by newcomers. Also, two of the group members were not Jewish and were less likely to use the JCC.

### **Constraints Inherent to Living in One's Own Cultural Community**

While living in an Eastern European community offers support and assistance to newcomers, it was felt that it can also be restrictive. For example, when one man first arrived in Toronto, he felt there was no choice as to where to live since he would only live where his friends were. This was the most important thing. Now he knows more about the city, but would choose to stay in this area because he likes it.

Also, the group agreed that it is important to become familiar with the larger community, noting that their children will be in school with all cultural groups. They don't want to be isolated within their community, but feel they need help to integrate and to be able to live together with others.

### **Culturally-Specific Services: Important for Seniors**

The group felt that while it is helpful to have services in their own language, it is not as important for them as it is for their elders. It is especially important in the context of health-related services, such as drugstores, where prescriptions must be understood.

### **Public Transportation**

While the group commented that their access to public transportation was good, one person remarked that it didn't seem right to have to pay the same amount for a short trip as for a long one.

## **C. Liabilities and Negative Factors**

### **Lack of Affordable Day Care**

The women were vocal about the lack of affordable day care, suggesting that if your income is average, and both parents are working, one income is needed mainly to cover day care costs. Due to this expense, some felt that it was impossible to have another child; it would be too expensive. They explained that even if the wife is a professional and she would like to work and be an income earner for the family, when you look at the figures, from a financial perspective, it's better to stay home. All agreed that affordable day care is a big problem. They mentioned how, in Russia and Romania, child care was free, which allowed women greater freedom to work or study and participate in the community.

### **Lack of Affordable Housing**

They also thought that rents were very expensive. One woman said she had to pay \$900 for a 2 bedroom apartment. She thinks the rents are higher in their neighbourhood because there's much demand for units due to a large Russian Jewish population. She believes that you can find an apartment for less in other areas. All the participants were concerned about the removal of rent controls.

### **Limited Banking Hours**

Some expressed frustration with limited banking hours. They said: "if you work in the day, how are you to get to the bank?" It was felt that in Israel, for example, banking hours were more amenable to working peoples' schedules.

## **D. Coping and Supports**

The participants identified a number of options they had for help when needed. Key sources of support were their friends and family, as well as their community and cultural networks. For medical emergencies or health concerns, they would see their family doctor or go the hospital. In case of harassment, for example, they would contact the police.

## **E. Desired Resources and Services for Newcomers**

### **Need for Central Information Source**

The group discussed the need for a community resource centre where you could get government information and services in your own language. This would include information regarding job search, child benefits, neighbourhood schools, and how to access services. It would be a 'one-stop-shopping' centre for information and access to services that are important for newcomers. They emphasized the need for this type of service to be 'human', not computerized. They felt there is a need for human advice in your own language that can respond to needs on an individual basis. They suggested that it would be cheaper to provide comprehensive service to newcomers and get them moving along sooner, compared to the amount of time some spend on welfare because there are not effective enough services available in the beginning. There could be one place for help for all newcomers regardless of the country/culture of origin.

**Other Resources and Services**

Previously mentioned was the need for affordable housing and child care, and help with integrating into the larger community.

# **Findings from Service Providers**

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Programme Director  
Community Health Centre  
June, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Access to Amenities**

It was felt that residents in Lawrence Heights have good access to services. The Programme Director stated that “It is a well-serviced area. There are schools within the community and shopping is very close. There are two major shopping centres and local businesses nearby.” In addition, residents have access to community agencies such as the YMCA and North York Parks and Recreation.

**2. Diversity**

The Lawrence Heights community is a very diverse community which is seen as a positive factor. “In general people who live here really appreciate the diversity of the community. Pretty well anyone from any part of the world could come here and feel a sense of familiarity. There are pockets of people living in Lawrence Heights who represent many different backgrounds, ethnic groups, religious groups, and socio-economic groups.”

**3. History of Resident Activism**

According to the Programme Director, Lawrence Heights has a fairly lengthy history of activism which has had positive effects on the community. “Being involved in the process of building community is something that people in this community hold very dearly. This activism has helped to build a mechanism through which residents in the community can gain support from each other.”

This history of activism prompted the establishment of one of the oldest community-based organizations, the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance. It was felt that the Area Alliance still remains focussed on the needs of the community.

The community health centre played a key role in the establishment of the Action Squad, a group of seniors who advocate for better housing. “We helped facilitate the meeting of active seniors, who were interested in working on action-oriented issues related to housing.”

The Programme Director also described the following two examples where the community was successful in getting their issues addressed. The first issue was related to the poor condition of the housing units. “Residents have been lobbying Metro Housing Company Ltd. for years in order to upgrade the housing units.” The community’s lobbying efforts have resulted in positive outcomes. For example, many of the homes have been equipped with proper insulation, safe windows, intercom systems and new locks.

In the second case, the community was successful, after several years of lobbying, in acquiring community space in the Lawrence Square shopping mall. “It is a general community space for the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood. The space is shared by a number of different organizations, such as the Flemingdon Adult Learning Centre and North York Women’s Centre.”

**4. Physical Aspects**

The Programme Director pointed out some of the positive physical aspects of the Lawrence Heights community. “People enjoy living here because it is a community that is more of a neighbourhood. Here I am talking more in terms about Lawrence Heights proper. The Lawrence Heights community is geographically bound. In that regard, it has much more of a distinctness in terms of a neighbourhood which can be easily identified. You see a lot of green space. It is clean, and well maintained on the surface.”

## **5. Public Transportation**

The accessible transportation system was identified as a strength. “Lawrence Heights is very close to the highway and the subway system. There is a bus service that runs through the neighbourhood. Lawrence Heights is also centrally located in terms of Metro Toronto, as it is easily accessible to midtown, downtown, and both the east and west ends.”

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Issues of Newcomers**

According to the Programme Director, the issues related to low income are intensified for newcomers. “People are so overwhelmed by the contrast to the life they had before and the life they have now. Particularly people from countries where English is not their first language, where there are dramatic cultural differences, and political conflict.” Newcomer families are unfamiliar with the Canadian system, in terms of resources and supports. They are lacking the knowledge and understanding of how to access these support services. These range from accessing primary health care to dealing with legal issues.

#### **Agency Response**

The community health centre responds to the needs of newcomers by providing people with the information they need to make informed decisions. The CHC provides education and promotes the development of advocacy skills among newcomers. It was felt that making information accessible to newcomers was an essential service provided by the centre.

### **2. Low Income**

The majority of residents in Lawrence Heights are dealing with issues related to low income. “People are here by circumstance rather than by choice as they cannot afford private housing. Many of the families are headed by single parents, many of whom are women. There are also a lot of young people who are unable to get jobs. The majority of seniors are basically living on sole support from subsidies.” It was felt that these are common issues among all low income neighbourhoods.

### **3. Negative Publicity**

The Programme Director spoke about the ongoing problem of negative publicity about Lawrence Heights. It was felt that the media focuses on the negative aspects of the community, such as crime and violent incidents. In addition, the media also reinforces stereotypes associated with certain ethnic groups.

An example of a negative stereotype was referring to Lawrence Heights as the 'jungle'. This term was viewed as having racial overtones.

The biased media presentation has led to some community members attributing the negative publicity to young visible minorities. "One of the problems that has plagued the community is that particular groups in the community have been singled out as being responsible for the negative publicity. While there may be some validity to this, the widespread characterization is invalid."

#### **Agency Response**

It was felt that there were both positive and negative impacts of negative publicity. On one hand it brings people in the community together around a common issue. However, at the same time it entrenches various micro-communities into ethnic groups, and reinforces stereotypes such as "all young black kids are criminals."

The CHC has been continuously working with the community to address this issue. "When we see negative publicity we are on top of the media immediately. Many people in the community have become empowered in the process by being able to speak out and address the harm that has been inflicted by the media."

#### **4. Social Assistance Cutbacks**

The cutbacks to social assistance were viewed as impacting residents of Lawrence Heights -- these cuts intensify the problems that existed before. "With the cuts we are seeing more and more people in desperate situations, especially since we identify marginalized people as our target population. For example, our case co-ordinators often have to deal with people who have no food or no more money to last them until their next subsidy check. This is a serious issue for us."

#### **Agency Response**

The CHC has made a concerted effort to respond to the effects of the cutbacks on community members. "We attempt to assist people by trying to find financial resources to tide them over. We also advocate with them when dealing with government agencies such as the Social Assistance Review Board or the Immigration and Refugee Board." It was stated that even these government agencies believe that community members are involved in a strangle hold.

#### **4. Violence**

The Programme Director spoke about the issue of violence in the Lawrence Heights community and the need for it to be addressed.

#### **Agency Response**

One way the CHC responds to the issue of violence is by providing educational workshops. They are also in the process of developing a program to address issues of family violence, particularly wife abuse. In addition, one of the youth groups received funding to develop educational sessions to address the issue of violence among youth.

### **C. Roles and Initiatives of the Community Health Centre (CHC)**

The Programme Director described the dual roles of the CHC as health promotion and prevention activities at the community level, and provision of primary health care at the individual level. The programs provided at the centre can be divided into four main areas: seniors, youth, families, and women. Some of the CHC's current initiatives are presented below.

### **Collaborating to Address Culturally Specific Needs**

The CHC has been involved with other community agencies to help address the needs of specific cultural groups. Currently, they are developing some linkages with the North York Community House to work with the Tamil population. "Their funding is not as secured as ours is so we can offer different resources and endorse their services." The health centre is also working with the Somaliland Women's Organization to address needs of the Somali community in Lawrence Heights.

### **Parent Relief Program**

The CHC is currently investigating a Parent Relief program that was identified as a strong need by women. "We would like to have this program attached to or an integral part of our overall family programs."

### **Youth Council**

A local youth council was established which provides youth with an opportunity to develop leadership skills. The council is encouraged to take a proactive approach in addressing issues related to youth in their community. The council receives training to go out into the community and mobilize other youth. They also identify the needs of youth in the community on an ongoing basis. They are working with the CHC to establish a youth sexual health clinic.

### **Youth Group**

The Programme Director described the youth group which works primarily with African/Black Canadian youth. "When we started working with youth a quite a number of them were having difficulty in school. Over the years, all of them have become outstanding students. They are creative and motivated. We are proud of the input we have put into supporting their development." The group has also been working on community issues such as youth violence.

### **Other Programs and Partnerships**

The Programme Director listed a number of other programs and partnerships that the CHC is involved with in Lawrence Heights. The programs include: the Parent-Child Drop-in, Nobody's Perfect for parents of young children, and a pre-natal program. The CHC has partnerships with: North York Parks & Recreation, Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre, Jamaican Canadian Association, YMCA, Children's Aid Society, and Black Cap, a community-based agency focusing on youth and HIV.

## **D. Support and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

### **Committed Board of Directors**

The board of directors, which is comprised of community members, was identified as a support to the CHC. They are “very supportive and interested in our work. The board is kept up-to-date, and take an active part in some of our programs that we run in the community.”

### **Good Physical Resources**

The physical space at the CHC is a resource that facilitates interaction with community groups. “The rooms at the community health centre are the only places with free access where groups in the community can meet during business hours. For some community groups, this is the only interaction they have with us.”

### **Partnerships with Community Agencies**

The Programme Director identified partnerships with community agencies as a support that assists the CHC to achieve its mandate. “We have a strong base of support from all of the different agencies and institutions who work with people from this community. These agencies include schools, North York Parks and Recreation, Children’s Aid Society, Jamaican Canadian Association, YMCA and to some extent the Metro Housing Company.”

### **Political Support**

Local politicians have been supportive of the CHC’s programs. “We really have never had a lot of problems with politicians in terms of them showing up and addressing critical issues that residents are concerned about. Howard Moscoe is probably the most popular and well loved. He is a big supporter of the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance.” Regarding the issue of the sale of public housing, a number of politicians came to speak at community forums and promised to take residents’ concerns back to Ottawa.

### **Volunteers**

Volunteers are a source of support for the centre. “We get approached all the time from people who would like to volunteer with us. Many of those people are newcomers, or people who have had difficulty entering the workforce and would like to build skills with us. Others are interested in working with us to bring about a better community. We also have a number of students who come to us consistently, such as medical, social work, and community service students.”

## **2. Barriers**

### **Lack of Awareness of Health Promotion Services**

The Programme Director expressed difficulty with increasing the awareness of their health promotion services within the community. “The prevalent understanding in the larger community is that the CHC is a health clinic. People recognize us as a place where they can get clinical services. People come to see their family doctor. The community health promotion side, despite all of our work and frequent outreach services, is still unrecognized. We know there is a need for more inherent health promotion in all the services we provide.”

### **Language and Cultural Barriers**

The diversity of Lawrence Heights results in language and cultural barriers for service providers. It was felt that there were limitations in what programs the CHC could provide. “We are rich in human resources but there are only so many languages and only so much understanding that we can have of all the cultures represented in this community.”

### **Limited Resources**

The Programme Director described the impact of working with limited resources in a rapidly changing environment. “There are always new families moving into the community which makes it difficult to know how to meet their needs. The staff are under resourced and over worked. At the same time the needs of the residents are intensifying. As our resources shrink, we are being put in the position of having to say no. This does not feel good and is very dissatisfying at the end of the day.”

### **Social Assistance Cutbacks**

The Programme Director reiterated the impact of social assistance cutbacks as an issue which affects community members of Lawrence Heights. The cutbacks also were seen as a barrier because they negate effective action by the centre’s community health workers.

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Community Health Worker  
Community Health Centre  
June, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Community Agencies and Resources**

An important contribution to quality of life in this community is that community resources are nearby. Lawrence Heights residents enjoy proximity to the Lawrence Heights CHC, the Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre (CRC), and to employment and other services at Lawrence Square Mall.

**2. Community Health Centre**

It was felt that the CHC in this community is seen as well established and viewed positively for the breadth of services it offers. Services include both primary care and health promotion programs. The CHC has a more holistic approach to health than more traditional medical services, and this is seen as a strength for the community. Community health workers from the CHC, as well as other community workers in the area, are seen to impact on the community in a positive way. Also, participation in health promotion groups of the CHC was seen to contribute positively to the community. Participants in CHC groups enjoy support from each other and in turn work to support their families and their community. Finally, the CHC offers the community access to space for meetings.

**3. Cultural Sensitivity and Access to Services in Different Languages**

Clients of the CHC have noted that the community workers are sensitive to the cross-cultural makeup of the community, and offer services in a culturally-sensitive manner. The CHC and other community organizations offer services in many languages. Since the Lawrence Heights community includes many newcomers to Canada and are likely to be using community services, this is an important community strength.

**4. Low Accommodation Costs**

The majority of families in this community have low incomes. Therefore they need access to low cost housing, which is available in Lawrence Heights.

**5. Public Transportation**

Being near to public transportation is another positive factor. In particular, the closeness to the subway station is important.

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Cuts to School Services for Children with Disabilities**

Often one of the issues that brings parents to the CHC is that their children have disabilities and special needs. Obtaining services for their children can be a source of great stress. However, an additional issue at this time is that parents perceive that school-based services for their children are being cut.

### **2. Employment: Resource Requirements**

People, and in particular women, who are considering employment may actually find that they lack the personal financial resources to join the workforce. They would need enough money to fund child care and transportation, as well as work clothing and other work-related expenses. “I think for women it’s a vicious circle in terms of money, transportation, day care . . . and even if they find a job it’s a low paid job . . . at the end they feel that it’s not worth it.” The community health worker noted this particular issue crosses cultural groups in the Lawrence Heights community and is common among refugee and immigrant women.

### **3. Employment: Skills Deficits**

For women who have been out of the workforce or who perhaps have never entered it, there is some concern that their skills may not be up to date. This creates an added stress and disadvantage for women who have children and await entry or re-entry to the workforce until their children are school-aged.

### **4. Lack of Parent Relief**

For parents at home with their children, there are few opportunities to take even a short break from parenting. This can create stress for both parents and children.

### **5. Language Barriers: Community Conflicts**

Language barriers experienced by non-English speakers can affect community life. Often there are misunderstandings and conflicts with neighbours which cannot be easily resolved due to the lack of common language. These conflicts may be heightened by stress, personality conflicts, clashing values, and discrimination, but without common language, it is difficult to sort the issues out.

### **6. Language Barriers: Service Difficulties**

A common problem, particularly among seniors within the community, is non-fluency in English. This can create problems in terms of service access.

### **7. Poverty and Unemployment**

Poverty was seen as the major problem in the community. The community health worker described poverty as “the mother of many other things that come along.” Closely related to the poverty issue in this community is the lack of available jobs for community members.

### **8. Poverty: Effects on Health**

The impact of poverty on health was noted. These impacts may be direct or indirect. For example, poverty can affect the ability of persons (especially seniors) to purchase medication, and affects access to good nutrition.

### **9. Poverty: Reduced Access to Recreation**

While this community has a Recreation Centre which people can use for free, the cost of recreation is still an issue. Even going to a “free” recreation area, such as a park, often causes a demand for money because children want ice cream or hot dogs. The ability to use leisure time to go places, for example to a movie as a family, is impacted by poverty.

### **10. Poverty: Seniors Issues**

Many seniors in the community live in poverty. Seniors on fixed incomes are vulnerable to even small changes in cost of living. For example, if they are living in accommodation where prices increase by \$20.00 per month, they may have to juggle other expenses, such as forgoing a metro pass. Seniors living in poverty may present to the Community Health Centre with multiple problems in addition to health problems. These can be difficult to disentangle.

### **11. Poverty: Struggle for Food and Clothing**

Because of limited incomes, many people in the community, particularly those with children, struggle just to buy food and clothing, and are finding this struggle to be more difficult now than it was in the past. Many women are trying to manage households where there is unemployment or incomes have been reduced for other reasons. Women often play an important role in keeping the family organized in terms of food and clothing, and thus bear the burden of this difficulty.

### **12. Seniors: Isolation**

Many seniors are isolated because they do not speak English. However, they can also be isolated because they rarely go out (especially those who are 75 or over), they have a fear of going out, and their families may be too busy to visit or bring them to their homes. An additional problem is that isolated seniors can be hard to find in order to offer services to them.

## **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

### **1. Roles**

The key role of the CHC is to provide community members with a way to understand and deal with their health in all of its dimensions: physical, social, psychological, and spiritual. Services are of two main types: primary health care, which uses a team approach, and community development and health promotion services. The CHC attempts to deal with health-related issues in an integrated way.

### **2. Initiatives**

#### **Empowerment Approach**

To address many of the issues faced by the community members, an empowerment approach is used. The focus of services is to enable clients to take better control of their own lives. For example, in groups the emphasis is on facilitating the members to find their individual and collective strengths, to take control of their own health but also to contribute to the well-being of the community. The direction of the group, in terms of content, is very much participant-directed. The Centre tries to use its groups to provide feedback about services and identify other community needs. Access to information is seen by the community health worker as a powerful component of this approach.

### **Identification of Unmet Needs in the Community**

An important part of the CHC's work is to identify, through formal needs assessments and through ongoing contact with community members, community needs which are not yet being met. Some of these needs are described below.

**Addressing Elder Abuse.** There is also a need to find resources to deal with issues of elder abuse. Such cases can be particularly challenging given current (case management) resources because they must be dealt with on an individual basis, and frequently involve issues of isolation.

**Addressing Issues of Domestic Violence.** The CHC has few resources to deal with the topic of domestic violence, which an important issue in the community. It was noted that issues around family violence often differ in families who are refugees, recent immigrants, and long-time Canadians.

**Analysis of Cultural Issues.** It was felt that the whole area of conflict resolution and culture needs more analysis in this community, particularly with respect to Spanish-speaking persons. While Spanish speakers are thought of -- and served -- as a group, many people fail to realize that they come from many diverse countries and do not necessarily know each others customs and identify with each other. Discrimination may exist within the group as well as in the larger society; this needs to be addressed.

**Parent relief.** There is a need in the community for low-cost parent relief, so that children could be dropped off for short periods of time while parents carried out other activities or simply took a break. The CHC is discussing this issue and looking for funding for such a program.

### **Prenatal and Parenting Programs**

The prenatal program at the Centre integrates primary care and health promotion issues. Parenting programs address the issues of understanding the development of children and also the parents' own feelings. This is an important aspect of service in a community where there are many parents (mostly mothers) who are in their homes with young children for long periods of time and may be under significant stress from the issues described above.

The community health worker noted that the drop-in addresses issues of women and their roles, parenting young children, and growth and development issues. It also provides a forum for community members to learn about different aspects of each other's cultures as they pertain to raising families. It was felt that some improvements could be made to this program in terms of perhaps offering more structure, and more information about parent-child communication, especially around discipline issues.

### **Seniors' Group**

The Seniors' Group enables Spanish-speaking seniors to participate in a community program without any language barriers. The community health worker noted the importance of this: "It's

important to have access through interpretation but at the same time, just to hear your own voice say something makes a difference to them. It's very empowering." The group often brings out the potential for development and leadership among the group members. It also provides a safe place to vent concerns. The seniors' group offers its members the additional advantage of a network of resources with which to solve their problems. This is accomplished through the knowledge gained in the group, plus the ready contact with service providers in the CHC.

### **Services for Spanish Speaking Persons**

The Centre offers services for Spanish speaking clients. The community health worker works as a case manager for these clients, particularly the elderly, to provide assistance to individuals around their particular issues (for example, settlement issues). The CHC also coordinates a support group for Spanish speaking women, and services (including a support group) for Spanish speaking seniors. In addition, the community worker works with other programs at the Centre when they wish to incorporate input or participation from the Spanish speaking community. Spanish speaking clients may also access more "generic" programs at the Centre, such as the family drop in program.

### **Women's Group**

The Spanish speaking women's group facilitates in-depth discussion of issues that are affecting women's lives, such as sexuality or roles of women. The group has an educational component which is driven by the interests of participants. The group is intergenerational, incorporating individual differences in experience, knowledge and skills.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Commitment to Social Justice**

The community health worker felt that the fundamental support to her work with the Spanish-speaking community of Lawrence Heights is her background in and her commitment to social justice. Because so many health issues stem from poverty, it is important to get involved with social action, community development, and women's organizations and not to just focus on curative services.

### **2. Barriers**

#### **Limited CHC Resources**

The resources of the CHC are finite and thus it is difficult to address new program needs, such as those described in the previous section, as they arise. At the time the interview was conducted, the community health worker's position was half time and her schedule very full, impacting on her ability to undertake new programs and to do outreach. The community health worker's position is also a contract position. The nature of this type of position is that its future is uncertain; therefore activities can only be

undertaken if they can be accomplished in a certain time frame or if there is a mechanism for sustaining them.

### **Outreach Issues**

Resources for outreach are also limited. There is an awareness that many people in the community who could be benefitting from available services are not hearing of them. Despite use of personal and non-personal outreach, this barrier remains. It was felt that whole cultural groups, for example members of the Somali community, remain isolated from services which could potentially benefit them. It was felt that specific outreach strategies must be developed for particular groups, in order to overcome this barrier.

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Youth Community Worker  
Community Health Centre  
June, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Community Agencies and Resources**

The community worker mentioned that there are many resources located right in the community. These include the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, North York Parks and Recreation, the Area Alliance and the Scott Mission. "So it's just a matter of how people tap into the resources within their community . . . The resources might actually be the main thing in this community."

**2. Cultural Diversity**

Lawrence Heights is seen as a very culturally diverse community and this is seen as a positive factor. "What makes it good for the people who live in the community is its diversity. The fact that there are several pockets of communities that reside in Lawrence Heights."

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Condition and Maintenance of Homes and Grounds**

The buildings in the community were seen as being in poor condition and inadequately maintained, having a negative effect on health and quality of life. "Housing is definitely a determinant of health. If you have poor housing then your quality of life is definitely not going to be great." The community worker mentioned that repairs are not done promptly. As well, it was felt that the grounds and green space could be improved, by adding gardens and more playground equipment, for example.

**2. Negative Media Portrayal of Neighbourhood**

Although she feels that things are getting better, the negative portrayal of the community by the media is an issue that concerns the community worker. She commented: "You've got the media sort of trashing Lawrence Heights . . . You know the violence that goes on in the community, but nobody ever comes in to talk about things like youth from Lawrence Heights doing great work."

**3. Poor Relationship with Housing Authority**

It was felt that residents did not have a good relationship with the Housing Authority. As the community worker stated: "It's not a very open, positive type of relationship." Also, they were not seen as providing support to the community's young people. There is a residents' group that has been working on improving communication between residents and the Housing Authority.

**4. Stigma of the Neighbourhood**

The community worker felt that there is a stigma attached to Lawrence Heights. She noted that people refer to Lawrence Heights as 'the jungle', which has both positive and negative connotations. For people who live in Lawrence Heights it helps to provide a sense of community and connectedness with

one's neighbours: "Hey, I'm from the jungle. This is my community. I belong to this community." "It's a positive word for the people who live here." However, for those who don't know anything about the community, the term has negative connotations.

The stigma attached to Lawrence Heights also presents itself when young people are looking for work. As the community worker explained: "When they're looking for employment, if employers see Lawrence Heights on the resume, for example, it could deter them from maybe calling the person for an interview."

## **5. Stereotypes of Youth**

Negative stereotypes of youth were seen to affect their ability to hang out and socialize at the local mall. The community worker noted that the youth don't feel comfortable in the mall, even though it's right in their community. "Again it's that negative thinking that young people or people from Lawrence Heights are all thieves or they might go there and vandalize the mall, but it's not the case. I think what happens even more is that people from here take better care of the mall because it's right in their community."

### **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

#### **1. Roles**

The mandate of the community health centre was described as "to provide services to people who live, work or go to school in our catchment area." The community worker runs groups which meet the needs of youth. She does not do one-to-one counselling, but sometimes individuals will come to her about problems. She described the benefits of her work with youth: "The youth obviously come here because they're looking for some kind of enrichment, and if that means improving the quality of life, then that's why we're here."

#### **2. Initiatives**

##### **Employment Help**

The community worker strives to find job opportunities for the youth she works with. For example, some youths from the community are hired to work in the summer program. "That's creating a job opportunity for a young person."

##### **Harambee Youth Group**

The community worker runs a group called Harambee which targets youth of African descent between the ages of 15 and 19. Harambee has about 20 members and 12 to 16 individuals come on a weekly basis. Much of the group's work focuses on developing personal and leadership skills. "A lot of those young people are at the stage where they could be doing God knows what. But by providing this type of program it gives them an opportunity to develop leadership skills. Skills they could use to further their education, to maybe go further in their careers for example. It helps them in terms of decision making, making the right choices around sexuality, around choosing the right school and around parenting." It was felt that "there has been great achievements in leadership."

The community worker emphasized the partnership approach to the program: “It's not my youth group. I'm there as a resource running the group, however it's their group. Decisions are made together. It's very important for us as community workers to make sure that we listen and hear the needs of people. I'm not here to work for them. I'm here to work with them and share ideas and input into decisions.”

### **Make Referrals**

Providing referrals is another part of the community worker's job. As she stated: “If there are services that we are unable to provide, then I think it's our job to tap into resources or hook people up into resources that can help them or provide the services they need.”

### **Summer Camp**

At the time of the interview, the community worker was preparing for a six week summer camp. It targets low income youth ages 11 to 14. It provides educational, recreational and social programming, including in-class activities and trips to Canada's Wonderland or Ontario Place. She explained that the kids “depend on this type of program to have some kind of fun over the summer.” And for parents, it was felt that without the camp “you would have a lot of low income parents not knowing what to do with their youngsters when school finishes. For some of them it's an opportunity to get rid of their kids for six weeks. It's sort of like a babysitting service and that's okay as long as the child that is in the program is learning something, developing skills and is able to use those skills at a later date, to sort of meet their needs, that's what we're concerned with.”

### **Trillium Foundation Grant**

A grant was recently received from the Trillium Foundation “to do some work on violence in the community. Now that's not to say that there is more violence in Lawrence Heights than there is down the street, but it's to find alternatives to dealing with the issues of violence in the community, which is very positive for us because it's an opportunity for our young people here to show others that we are capable of leadership. It gives the young people an opportunity to say ‘We can do this. Thank you for the opportunity. We know we can do this.’ And their work has been actually respected from a source like Trillium Foundation.”

Under this grant they are planning two 'stop the violence' workshops. The first workshop will involve a youth panel discussion. The second workshop will involve a guest speaker who can engage the young people in a discussion around violence and come up with solutions and alternatives. “We know what the issues are so the question is how do we find alternatives or maybe solve some of the problems.”

Another avenue they will take to highlight the abilities and talents of young people in the community is to stage a talent show. “The other thing that we're going to do, which is going to be very big, is a community talent show targeting young people under 25. One of the reasons we felt the talent show would be good is because it targets everybody in the community. We've always said that there's a lot of talent in the community, but nobody ever sees it. Everybody always sees the negative things. So we wanted to show the community and show everybody else outside of the community that 'Hey! These are the talents!'”

### **Youth Advisory Committee**

The community worker also runs a Youth Advisory Committee and this is targeted at an older group than Harambee. There are ten members of mixed ethnicity. Half of the members belong to existing youth groups in Lawrence Heights and this ensures that information goes from the Youth Advisory Committee back to the existing youth groups. “It's a group that will act and advocate on behalf of all youth in Lawrence Heights. It will look at whether there is a need for a certain type of program.”

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Agency Support**

There is support for the community worker from the community health centre. She described the “resources within the agency and the individuals that I work with” as being a real support.

#### **Partnerships and Coordination of Services**

A key support is the good relationships that the community worker has developed with community partners since she started working at the health centre 14 months ago. The school board and North York Parks and Recreation were two examples she cited. These partnerships also help to ensure that services are provided in an efficient and coordinated fashion.

### **2. Barriers**

#### **Funding Issues**

It was felt that many more community needs could be met with more funding. For example, the summer camp can only accept 30 children, but she is sure there are more than 30 who would like to attend. “If the funds were available we'd be able to take maximum numbers.”

#### **Outreach to the Latin American Community**

The community worker mentioned that she would like to do more work with Latin American youth in the community, but that it has been a challenge to reach them and get them to attend activities or programs.

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Executive Director  
Settlement and Service Agency  
September, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Affordable Housing**

It was mentioned that there is affordable housing available in the area, compared to other parts of Toronto.

**2. Community Specific Service Networks**

In some neighbourhoods of the service catchment of the agency, there is a strong sense of community which is supported and enhanced by the services in the area. Examples of such neighbourhoods are Dufferin and Lawrence (traditionally an Italian community with the Columbus Centre), the Jewish community near Bathurst Street (which has services located a bit north of it but still maintains a strong core and network), and Lawrence Heights (with the Community Health Centre and the Community Recreation Centre).

**3. Cultural Diversity**

Cultural diversity is seen as a positive feature of the community. The community includes people of many different cultures. "People have the opportunity to interact with each other to gain some familiarity with other cultures, especially some of the newcomers."

**4. High Quality School**

An important strength of this community is the Joyce School. The school is known for its excellent administration and its involvement in community activities.

**5. Senior's Services**

Another positive factor in the community is the availability of programs and services for seniors, particularly in the Bathurst Street area. Services available to seniors include institutional support, home support, and social and recreational supports. There is also Metro housing available for seniors in this area.

**6. Service Delivery Approach**

From the perspective of the community agency, an important contributor to quality of life in a community is the way that services operate. In this community, the fact that services are high quality and that they work with groups in the community to identify issues and take collective action is very important. Organizations in this community that work in this manner include the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, some of the recreation facilities, and the North York Community House.

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Barriers to Service Access for Persons with Disabilities**

The need for advocacy in order to access or maintain services for persons with disabilities has become increasingly pronounced with recent service cuts. The agency offers an advocacy service for persons with disabilities. Through their work in this area, they have noticed that there is not a lot of assistance available for this population to assist them in accessing or advocating for services.

### **2. Difficulty Accessing Employment Services**

It was noted that while traditional employment services are readily available, many people need some assistance before they are ready to access them. They may not be aware of the services or how to access them. They may not be at a stage where they can identify or articulate their skills, which is necessary in order to identify potential jobs and apply for them.

### **3. Housing: Poor Condition and Maintenance**

Although housing is affordable, its quality and state of repair is an issue in this community. Housing tends to be old and in poor repair. It has been noted that it is very difficult to get landlords to make improvements or repairs to housing.

### **4. Lack of Activities for Youth**

It was felt that there is somewhat of a problem with youth “hanging around with not much to do.” The issue seems to be not just that the youth need something to do, but something to do with future purpose, such as employment or future-oriented training. There is a perception in the community that with youth relatively uninvolved, they are at risk of becoming involved in undesirable activities such as dealing or using drugs.

### **5. Lack of Programs for Children**

It was felt that there is a lack of programs for school age children in this community. Specifically, there is a lack of programs which focus on enrichment, such as skill development or tutoring.

### **6. Low and Decreasing Incomes**

A major problem in this community is that incomes are low; they have also decreased in the past two years due to such factors as unemployment, underemployment, changes to unemployment insurance, and cuts to welfare payments. It was noted that these problems are facing many people in Ontario and are not specific to this particular community.

### **7. Relatively Limited Numbers of Service Agencies**

It was felt that while the available services in this community are of high quality, there are relatively few of them. The executive director noted that compared to downtown Toronto or the Jane Finch area, there is much less availability of services. Moreover, while there is a good sense of community with the support of services in Bathurst, around Dufferin, and in Lawrence Heights, the area west of Lawrence Heights lack this sense of community and also lacks services.

## **8. Survival Versus Community Action**

In a community such as this one, where incomes are low and families are often newcomers to the country, the struggle for survival and adjustment to a new place consumes a great deal of time and energy and usurps confidence. As a consequence, it is difficult for people to engage in community development or collective action to address issues, for example, related to poor housing conditions.

## **9. Unemployment and Underemployment**

High unemployment is a big problem in the community which impacts on quality of life. “One of the things we found when people call or come in, or when we do needs assessments . . . lack of jobs is the top of the list.” Generally there is a lack of jobs, particularly those which are permanent and pay well. Newcomers to Canada may face additional barriers to employment. These might be due to lack of Canadian experience, language barriers, or discrimination. Many persons who do have jobs are underemployed, and/or are working at very low paid, non-permanent jobs which make them vulnerable to sudden job loss.

### **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

#### **1. Roles**

##### **Mandate: Geographic Priorities**

One mandate of the agency is to address gaps in service for the all of North York. However, they have focused their efforts on specific communities for two reasons. First, the lack of staff (they started in 1991 with two staff) made it impossible to serve all communities. The Board’s response to this problem was to divide the City into six geographic areas and focus on assessing needs of two of them in the southwest (bounded by Wilson Avenue, the 401, Bathurst Street and the Humber River), with the thought of expansion to other areas as services became established. Since that initial planning, a decision has been made to continue focusing on the needs of this geographic area because services are now starting to make an impact, and it does not seem prudent to change geographic focus.

The second reason for this geographic focus is that they started with a large grant which was conditional on service development in the Bathurst-Lawrence area. Since that time, they have discovered that more need exists west of Bathurst- Lawrence, and so their efforts have been focused accordingly. However, all of the agency’s services are open to residents who live anywhere in the North York area.

##### **Mandate: Service Priorities**

Within their current geographic area of focus the agency has found that a number of needs were not being met. Specifically, there were many newcomer groups but not settlement services in the area. People from these groups had to go elsewhere for service (Chinese and Tamil to downtown or Scarborough, for example). There was also a lack of general programs, and programs for youth and children. Thus services have been developed.

##### **Mandate: Community Responsiveness**

Service priorities ebb and flow with community needs and available resources. As the executive director explained: “Our mandate is pretty wide and we’ve tried in some ways, to do all the different

kinds of things that are needed, but to narrow it a bit because we can't be all things to all people. But we also try to be flexible in terms of being aware of what are the issues in the community and trying to work with people in the community to try to deal with them.”

## **2. Initiatives**

### **Action on Housing Issues**

As mentioned previously, housing is a key issue because of its general state and the difficulty that tenants have had in getting landlords to make necessary repairs. The agency has worked with a group of tenants from one of the large buildings at Keele and Lawrence. Eventually the tenants formed an association and they were able to make changes and get the landlord to deal with some of the most immediate issues. In addition, the agency has staged several workshops on housing access and tenant rights, and then talking about what action might be taken individually or as a group.

### **Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities**

The agency has had good demand for their services to assist persons with disabilities advocate for the services they need. While they have been able to work with some persons to access needed service, threats to service access whether in terms of employment, transportation, or housing continue to be an issue for this population.

### **Bridging to Employment Services**

It is apparent that the employment issue is a key one, and one that the agency struggles to deal with as best it can given limited resources and a rather bleak economic climate in the community. Some bridging services are offered, in order to get people to a level where they feel comfortable being referred to another organization. In addition, the agency has a resource centre for employment, which provides community members access to computers, general information about employment issues, and access to newspapers.

### **Identification of Unmet Needs in the Community**

The identification of community needs forms an important part of the agency's work. This information is used when planning future programs, engaging in networking, or soliciting funding. Examples of needs that have been identified but for which no programs have been initiated to date include enrichment services for children and activities for youth. In addition, the problems with unemployment in this community are clearly the subject of ongoing discussion and strategizing.

### **Multilingual Services**

An important part of settlement services and other services has been the agency's ability to offer service in the language of the groups who live in the community. At present they are able to offer services in Tamil and Spanish. In the past, through the NDP-sponsored Multilingual Social Assistance Program, they were able to provide service to Tamil, Spanish, and Vietnamese communities specifically geared to interacting with the social assistance system. Since the change in government, the funding has been withdrawn and thus the agency no longer offers services in Vietnamese.

### **Networking with Community Agencies**

Extensive networking with other community agencies is used to look at different ways of doing things or doing whatever it takes to provide needed services. Examples of networking include the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, the Macaulay Centre and Metro Toronto Housing Authority in the Trethewey community, the Board of Education around seniors programs, and numerous organizations such as the Centre for Independent Living, Barrier Free Health Program, and Anne Johnson Health Centre regarding issues of persons with disabilities.

### **Partnerships: Example of Providing Service to the Latin American Community**

Recently the agency has started networking on a broader scale, in order to lobby for services which could be shared by a larger geographic region. They have been working with agencies outside their community, such as Jane Finch Community Family Centre, Northwoods Neighbourhood Services, Daystream, Delta, and other organizations to form a partnership to serve the Latin American community across western North York. This group has received some funding from Metro Toronto and hopes to acquire additional funding from other sources. It seems that this approach may be useful in the future for developing other services.

### **Partnerships with Business**

The next step for the agency will be to look at partnerships with the business community and possibly religious institutions. While business is often seen as having different priorities and different ways of doing things, there is the feeling that such partnerships should be developed in the future.

### **Support for Settlement**

Settlement issues were identified as a priority from the inception of the agency, since it's mandate is to work with persons who traditionally have the most difficulty in accessing services. Many services have been provided over time, including English as a Second Language classes, support groups, and parenting groups. The types of services offered have changed over the years, in response to community issues and needs.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Funding**

Overall, the agency has very little base funding. However, the small amount of funding they receive through the United Way and for their LINC program have been a great support in terms of providing some stability.

#### **Networking**

Networking and partnerships as described in the previous section are a definite support to this organization, in terms of meeting needs and planning future programs. Despite the fact that there are few social service organizations in the community, those that are there work together well.

#### **Participants and Volunteers**

People who come out to the agency's programs, get involved, and help out are seen as a major support to the organization. "There's some pretty remarkable people who are out there and even with the difficulties in their own lives they're there to help, to get involved in programs, to come, to support other people . . . I think that's definitely a real positive factor."

#### **Staff and Board Members**

The staff and board are seen as strengths of this organization. Their commitment to do the work with such limited resources forms an important support.

### **2. Barriers**

#### **Difficulties in Informing the Community of Available Services**

Because of the size of the community and the relatively few social service agencies, it is difficult to let everyone know about the available services. The agency does some outreach activities but these can be very labour, and therefore resource, intensive. Similarly, they often lack the resources for PR campaigns.

#### **Disempowerment of Community Members**

In terms of community development approaches, one barrier is that many people in this community have not had a positive experience of having the power to change their lives through collective action. "The message that has been given [is to] forget it, they're not going to make it, or it's not going to work, or they don't have much power." For some, the struggle of day to day life, of feeding children and having money to live, is also disempowering.

#### **Funding Issues**

**Lack of Base Funding.** Unlike many social service organizations, the agency does not have base funding from the provincial government or Metro. This creates a barrier due to lack of stable resources. The reason that they lack this base funding is that they started up in 1991, in an era where new programs

were not being funded. Start-up and some program-specific funds have been available from the government, but not ongoing funding. Ironically, this has ended up benefitting the organization in some respects, since they were not victimized by the more recent round of cuts to government funding of social services.

**Funding for Ongoing Programs.** Having enough money to carry out the current programs is always an issue. This can pose a barrier to program implementation and continuity. It was felt that agency is providing only the most basic of settlement services and they would like to increase their involvement in this area. Initial government funding for this aspect of their work has since been cut and they struggle to provide basic services from core funding.

**Funding for New Programs.** As mentioned previously, the agency has identified program needs which it is unable to meet due to resource constraints. These include enrichment programs for children, youth activities, and better employment programs.

### **Lack of Space**

While the agency has recently moved to better quarters, they still experience barriers to mounting new programs because of lack of space. For example, there is only one child-care room, which is fully used; this prohibits development of additional parent-child drop-in programs. In the past the agency tried to use other community spaces for activities but available spaces were often inappropriate.

### **Language Barriers**

The agency lacks staff and/or volunteers to be able to serve Somali, Chinese, and Vietnamese community members in their own language. Thus this creates a barrier to the participation of sizeable groups in the community, many of whom may require settlement services.

### **Limits to Solutions for Poverty**

A major barrier which agencies in the community must face is the limits in the practical solutions they can provide for the unrelenting problem of poverty. As was mentioned previously, it is difficult to assist people to become employed when there is a basic lack of available jobs. Incomes for those on social assistance or unemployment insurance cannot be increased. They can help people to procure housing but there are basic limitations in availability and the condition of housing. Hunger and food are issues which can be addressed in a limited way through programs such as the community kitchens. But the underlying issue of poverty cannot easily be resolved or remediated.

### **Transience of Volunteers**

Volunteers have provided valuable assistance to the agency, but frequently use the work as a bridge to employment. This is positive for the individuals, but a barrier to continuity of service for the organization.

## **Community Quality of Life Interview Community Worker Settlement and Service Agency**

**September, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Access to Tamil Advocate**

It was felt that members of the Tamil community appreciate having a Tamil speaking worker who can advocate on their behalf. It was mentioned that sometimes access to the Tamil worker is faster through the relatively small local agency than it would be through larger, Tamil-specific agencies such as Tamil Eelam Society.

**2. Community Agencies and Resources**

It was mentioned that a positive factor in this community is that resources such as the North York Community House and schools are close at hand.

**3. Peace**

One of the most important aspects of community life for Tamils who have recently come to this country is its peacefulness. Many Tamils are refugees and have come from ethnic persecution and war conditions in which they have lost family members. The community worker explained: "Because they come from a war situation [they say]: 'Thank God that we have this here, just to live peaceful and take care of our kids.'"

**4. Safety**

Related to the issue of peace, the members of the Tamil community appreciate the relative safety in which they live. For example, the women feel that they are able to go out of their homes safely after 6:00 pm, which they could not do in their home country.

**5. Schooling in Canada**

A very important factor related to quality of life for the Tamil community is the quality of schools for their children. Generally, Tamils who have recently come to Canada are happy with the quality of Canadian schools. If they are happy with a particular school, they are likely to stay in that community even if other amenities, such as housing, are less than desirable. Joyce School was mentioned in particular as being a very positive factor in this community. The school is known for recently having received an award for excellence.

**6. Social Support within Tamil Community**

For newcomers in particular, the support and familiarity of one's own cultural group is very important. Tamil community members support each other and feel that the large size of the Tamil community in this area is a positive factor. Being able to identify with their own group reduces isolation.

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Adjustment to New Roles - Home and Work**

Most of the Tamils in this community come from rural areas and have led a traditional lifestyle. This means that married women are used to staying in the home with children while men go out and work. Because of this, many of the women are resistant to going out of their homes.

While men come to Canada with work experience, women tend to have neither work experience nor training. Women going out to work is not part of their (rural) cultural tradition. However, there is some realization among the women that they will need to prepare themselves to work as their children get older.

### **2. Language Barriers**

Many Tamils do not speak English well enough to function or work in the community without an interpreter. Language can be an issue even for educated Tamils. Many find that they are not truly fluent, and this creates low self-esteem, a feeling that “I’m nowhere here in Canada.”

There is, however, interest within the Tamil community in learning English, which is especially motivated by an interest in being able to keep pace with their children.

### **3. Limited Education**

In keeping with the rural background, most Tamils in this community have only Grade 10 education. Upgrading education is difficult for newcomers because of limited English skills.

### **4. Low Incomes**

Poverty is a major issue in this community. Most families are on full or partial social assistance.

### **5. Unfamiliarity with Service Approach**

The traditional way of life of the Tamil people means that they are not accustomed to seeking counseling for problems, particularly in a group forum. They are comfortable with a worker or an “official”, but less comfortable seeking counseling especially from outside the home. The tradition of the people is that counseling needs were met inside the family. It takes effort for social service agencies to foster a feeling of security in program participants.

## **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

### **1. Roles**

The mandate of the agency is to serve newcomers and assist them with settlement issues. The Tamil community is one focus of the agency. Almost all Tamil women have children; there are many single parent families headed by women. A survey of Joyce Public School showed that more than 50 % of students are Tamil or Asian. The Caledonia area, where many Tamils live, consists of 740 condo units in high-rise buildings and townhouses.

An important part of the services provided to Tamils is the facilitation approach used by the community worker. She sees her role as building confidence in the women she works with so that they

can become independent. The philosophy of the agency is to help newcomers gain access to resources and information, so they are able to help themselves and each other. This has been somewhat of a struggle because many Tamil women are not used to this approach.

## **2. Initiatives**

### **Community Kitchens**

The community kitchen meets a variety of needs in the Tamil community. First, it is seen as a social event and as such, is well accepted by community members. Second, many food-related topics of interest are covered, such as how traditional and Canadian foods are prepared. Third, it has enabled members to buy their familiar foods in bulk. Fourth, it has enabled the women to use their strengths and abilities to co-organize the group and teach each other skills. And perhaps most importantly to the work of the agency, it has allowed the women to come together as a group and become familiar with mutual aid as a mechanism for sharing their problems and solutions. The community worker indicated that it has served as a “bridge” to get women interested in coming out to support groups and educational sessions.

### **Employment**

Partly due to the agency’s shortage in resources, it was felt that employment is an issue which they have not been able to address well. The Tamil women have indicated some interest in cottage type industries (sewing, for example) and the agency is not equipped to meet this need. Some women have gained work experience by volunteering with the agency.

### **English as a Second Language Program**

The agency runs the Language Instruction Program for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), which is open to all cultural groups.

### **Health Information**

Educational sessions have focused on health issues of interest to the women. Child health and women’s health have been discussed.

### **Heritage Language Program**

Since the community was interested in preserving their language skills, particularly amongst the children, the agency helped the Tamil community set up a heritage language program. A community member with language teaching skills conducts the program.

### **Housing**

The agency assisted tenants in the Keele and Lawrence area to form a tenant association. The tenants dealt with the landlord and advocated for changes.

### **Identifying Needs in the Community**

An important part of the work done by the agency is identifying community needs. A few years ago, the Multilingual Access to Social Assistance program which was funded that enabled the hiring of a

worker to escort and interpret for community members in their interactions with the welfare system. The agency used that opportunity to get to know the Tamil community and their needs. Now, there is a continual checking with members for what they feel are the needs of the community. Examples of programs which have responded to identified needs include the heritage language program, tenant's association, self-teaching groups, parent-child drop ins, and resource centres.

### **Outreach**

Outreach is very important in the Tamil community. The community worker has found that her day to day interaction in the community fosters interest in programs. Often outreach is accomplished by word of mouth.

### **Support Groups**

Support groups are convened for the women on topics of their interest. These groups have a mutual problem solving approach. It was mentioned that it takes more convincing to get the women to attend these sessions than the more socially oriented programs.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Networking and Referral**

The work of the agency is supported by the network of other agencies to whom people may be referred. For example, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture has been very supportive in terms of providing housing and other services for victims of war.

#### **Socialization Aspect of Programs**

Participation by the Tamil community is enhanced if programs have a social component. Social events provide a more culturally familiar reason to leave the home and congregate in groups.

#### **Understanding of Facilitator Role**

One thing that supports the community worker is the understanding of her role by people who participate in her programs. Once they understand that her role is basically one of facilitation, then the individuals and groups start to achieve their goals.

## 2. Barriers

### **Funding Issues**

As with most community organizations, the major barrier is that of funding and resources. The community worker's position is part time and there is no time to take on new projects.

### **Volunteer Issues**

In general it is difficult to find volunteers. Because of the ongoing need for escorting and interpreting, volunteers that are required are often not available. Also, there is some resistance by Tamil community members to trust volunteers with confidential information. Part of the problem is that they became used to the community worker helping them under the former Multilingual Access to Social Assistance program, and now do not wish to deal with a "non-professional."

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Language Instruction for Newcomers Program Coordinator  
Settlement and Service Agency  
October, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Community Agencies and Resources**

The coordinator identified a number of community agencies and resources that assist newcomers. She said: "There isn't an abundance, but there's a pretty fair number of social service organizations that all play a role in settlement and transition." These agencies provide services and resources for all newcomers. If necessary, referrals can be made to other agencies that address needs of a particular group, such as Eastern Europeans. In addition to the services provided by the settlement and service agency, the following community resources were mentioned: COSTI, the community centre at Keele and Lawrence, Amesbury Library also located at Keele and Lawrence, as well as North York Board of Education schools. COSTI provides services to many newcomers from Eastern Europe, as well as other New Canadians. The community centre and library also have resources for newcomers. Many local schools offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

**2. Cultural Diversity**

The coordinator described the community as very multicultural. There are newcomers from many places, and as well, there are large numbers of some cultural groups. Both of these factors contribute to a sense of comfort and community for newcomers. "There's lots of different groups but there's also large numbers of their own group. So there's that real sense of community. They can associate with their own group and at the same time associate with other immigrant populations. So that helps with things feeling a little bit more like home, a little bit more comfortable, and a little bit less of a culture shock."

**3. Cultural Sensitivity of Service Providers**

The coordinator remarked on the high level of cultural sensitivity displayed by service providers. This sensitivity and awareness of issues and values for different cultural groups was seen as being of utmost importance. "The social service providers here, at the Community House and also in the area that we're talking about, have a good deal of cultural sensitivity, which is really important." This was also seen to have a positive impact on the community as a whole: "Because it's such a multicultural community, that sort of spills over into the residents, store owners, the malls. They don't have much choice but to accept and learn."

**4. LINC Program (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada)**

The LINC program was seen as a very helpful support to newcomers. As the coordinator described: "The special thing about LINC is that it's not just a language instruction program. It has all the other components of developing your knowledge and bettering your life here in Canada. So it's not just about learning language but it also has an instructional piece, to learn about your community and Canada as a whole."

## **5. Public Transportation**

The availability of public transportation and the central location of the community was seen as a benefit. “It’s not an isolated neighbourhood. It’s accessible as far as TTC and subways. That also helps in terms of getting familiar with things and where they are and how to get around. That’s something we’ve discussed in the LINC classes. It’s an easy neighbourhood to get around in.”

## **6. Safe Neighbourhood**

Safety issues have also been discussed in LINC classes. The coordinator noted that “It’s a safe neighbourhood. They feel safe.”

## **7. Stores and Services for a Multicultural Community**

Another strength of the community for newcomers is access to stores and services. The availability of familiar products, and having some services in their own language, are seen as helpful in the adjustment to life in Canada. As the coordinator stated: “There’s ethnic stores that offer foods that are familiar to them. There’s also ethnic newspapers that are readily available in this community. So I think all of that helps in their adjustment and their ability to feel a little bit more at home.”

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Accessing Services**

Accessing services can be difficult for newcomers. Both the language barrier and feelings of uncertainty play a role: “Because they’re newcomers, sometimes just accessing services, even though the services are accessible, again there’s an intimidation factor . . . It’s not the services that are inaccessible. It’s overcoming that fear of the unknown or the reaction that somebody may have towards you.”

### **2. Employment Issues: Family Roles**

An issue for some newcomers is that of changing roles in the family. The coordinator described that women having to work can be a difficult adjustment for some families to make. “Usually I find that for immigrants as a whole, it’s easier for women to get a job. And that’s hard for a lot of the men to deal with . . . Even if they’re working too, it’s a problem that their wife is working.”

### **3. Employment Issues: Jobs**

As the coordinator stated: “Employment is a really big issue for a number of reasons.” Not knowing the language is the first barrier to obtaining employment. Additionally, newcomers must sometimes take jobs for which they are overqualified. She explained: “Employment is an issue because of the language. Because they don’t necessarily have a grasp on the language yet. And because they’re immigrants as well, they’re often forced to take jobs that they’re over-qualified for or basic skilled labour just to make ends meet. And I think that plays a very negative role on your self-esteem.”

The coordinator also remarked that there seems to be a concentration of certain immigrant groups working in specific areas. For example, many Eastern European women are working in factories as sewing machine operators.

### **4. Expectations about Life in Canada**

It was felt that newcomers sometimes experience disappointment with their life in Canada: “We all have expectations of what life will be like when we come here. And although it might be good, we expect that immediately things will fall into place, and that doesn’t always happen. And then there’s disappointment.”

### **5. Involvement in Children’s Education**

The coordinator explained that being involved in their child’s education is novel for some newcomers, and that they need support in this endeavour. She explained that sometimes children are not placed at the appropriate level and they may not always be treated very well by the teacher. Sometimes, there are communication difficulties.

She felt that interacting with the school system can be intimidating: “It’s intimidating when you speak the language, much less when you don’t.” LINC class participants have discussed that “it’s the responsibility of the parents to play a part in their child’s education. A lot of times, depending where they’re from, the expectation is almost that you send your child to school and the school does everything, but it doesn’t work that way here. So you have to help them understand that and to make that transition.”

### **6. Language Barrier**

A very important issue for many newcomers is the language barrier they face. Improving their English language skills was seen as fundamental, as it impacts on so many aspects of life, including employment, accessing services and interacting with their children’s schools. These issues are discussed separately.

### **7. Lower Income**

In addition to employment difficulties and adapting to new roles in the family, the coordinator explained that newcomers may also experience difficulty adjusting to a lower income level. “When they come here, that pot of money that they had runs out very quickly. They’re used to a certain lifestyle that very quickly disappears. I think that’s the other role that income plays.”

### **8. Racism**

The coordinator remarked that racism is an issue for most newcomers, albeit for some groups more than others. “Racism is also an issue. It varies, on different scales with different groups, but I think for this group [Eastern European] it’s also an issue.” They have discussed racism in their LINC classes. For example, some had experienced racism but did not realize what it was initially. Others felt they had not experienced racism themselves but knew family members who had.

## **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

### **1. Advocacy**

The coordinator described the agency’s advocacy work: “One of the big mandates of our agency is advocacy. We do a lot advocating for individuals or advocating for large groups, trying to change policies or programs. Also implementing programs that the government may not necessarily be funding, because it’s a really big need in the community. And also helping people advocate for themselves. Giving

people the skills that they need to be assertive and stand up for themselves, and also play a role in trying to get some of their needs met. Again that would come into play with the school, advocating for their children, because that's a really big issue."

## **2. Collaboration with Other Agencies**

Working in partnership with other community agencies was seen as key when addressing many community issues and problems. The coordinator stated that the settlement and service agency often collaborates with other groups. They collaborate with other organizations in the community, as well as some outside the immediate area who have similar mandates and work with similar populations.

## **3. Increased Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities**

The coordinator noted that the agency is improving access to services for persons with disabilities. This should also increase participation of persons with disabilities in the LINC program.

## **4. LINC Program (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada)**

Listed previously as a strength, the LINC program addresses the need of many newcomers to learn English. It also provides knowledge and skills to help the transition to a new country. The coordinator felt that LINC is a very successful program. Although not much tracking of graduates is undertaken, she was aware of several LINC participants who had jobs. "It's an ongoing type of program where the participants are required to fill a certain number of hours of language instruction before they can graduate on to the next level. For the most part I think it's a pretty comprehensive program that prepares people to at least be able to function." She emphasized the need for LINC participants to practice their English as much as possible.

The coordinator was grateful that funding cuts had not yet affected the LINC program: "One good thing is that in light of all these funding cuts, it's a program that has survived that, for how much longer I don't know, but it's temporarily survived. I think it's because the government [knows] they are continuing to have large numbers of immigrants come into the country and they realize that it's very important that they learn the language. So, it's pretty much a priority of the government for now."

## **5. Outreach**

The agency does outreach at schools and community centres to inform newcomers of the LINC program. Government representatives also provide general information and brochures to newcomers arriving at various points of entry, such as airports and bus terminals. This includes information about the LINC program: "So that when they first come, they know this service is available."

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

The coordinator identified three main supports in her work with newcomers: 1) partnerships; 2) LINC program participants; and 3) recognition of community issues. The first support, mentioned

previously as a strength, is community partnerships and collaborative initiatives. Secondly, the people who participate in the LINC program also are support for the coordinator. She described them as “inspiring people” -- their success in the program inspires her. Finally, she felt it was important that funding bodies acknowledge community issues. While not all issues will receive funding, she felt it was important that they are not dismissed by the “powers that be.”

## **2. Barriers**

Insufficient funding was cited as the most important barrier. As a result, there is not enough staff or resources to meet community need. For example, service cannot be provided in some languages, even when there is a need.

Program participants also face barriers. Lack of child care or money for public transportation can prevent people from participating in community activities and programs. There may also be other barriers that prevent people from continuing with a program once they have started.

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Coordinator, Person-to-Person Support  
Settlement and Service Agency  
September, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Attractiveness of the Neighbourhood**

Given that many persons with disabilities have difficulty getting around and many stay in a confined area for large parts of the day, the attractiveness of the neighbourhood, and particularly the trees, flowers, and the green space used by community members, is very important. "Sometimes particularly when you're leading a reasonably sedentary life, to be able to see and watch is a really important part of quality of life."

**2. Low Traffic Volume in Neighbourhood**

Access is a pervasive issue for persons with disabilities. An access-related strength of this community is the neighbourhood does not have much traffic, because traffic and parked cars can pose hazards to people with mobility problems.

**3. Proximity to Amenities**

A high priority for persons with disabilities is close proximity to resources, services and shops. Proximity to shops and "the things of daily living" is especially valued.

**4. Proximity to Friends**

Having friends close by is a positive factor for persons with disabilities, providing that travel ways are accessible to persons using wheelchairs. Potential difficulties in obtaining transportation (such as Wheel Trans) makes the availability of friends nearby especially important for this population.

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Access Issues**

The most important issue facing persons with disabilities in this community is accessibility. There are problems of accessibility of sidewalks and curbcuts, and access to restaurants and stores via ramps and appropriate doorways. The impact of access on the ability to use nearby resources and interact with friends was noted above.

**Access to Transportation**

Accessibility of transportation affects the mobility and lifestyles of persons with disabilities. Specialized transportation may be required for even simple activities such as eating at a fast-food restaurant. There can be problems with booking and then obtaining Wheel Trans services.

**Accessibility: Snow Removal**

Winter makes physical accessibility problems worse. Snow, and more particularly, the lack of provisions for keeping walkways clear, causes hazards for persons with mobility problems, not just in terms of making it difficult for them to get around, but also causing problems such as people being stranded or stuck on sidewalks.

## **2. Attendant Care**

Attendant care is a necessity for some persons with disabilities in order that they can have their basic needs met. Waiting lists are very long for attendant care services throughout the Toronto area.

## **3. Housing Issues**

### **Availability of Subsidized Housing**

Many persons with disabilities in the area require subsidized housing. As the coordinator stated: “The housing crisis in Toronto is very, very bad, it’s incredibly challenging for people. Waiting lists are five years for subsidized housing.”

### **Cost of Housing**

The cost of housing, even subsidized housing, can be prohibitive for persons on fixed incomes, particularly in the face of social assistance cuts. The coordinator noted instances where people are spending three-quarters of their income on housing.

### **Lack of Power when Dealing with Housing Problems**

It was felt that some people feel powerless in trying to address issues such as landlord-tenant disputes and rent increases. This problem is tied into the lack of availability of subsidized housing, as there are few alternatives if people are unsatisfied.

## **4. Language Issue**

In this community, there are language barriers faced by some persons with disabilities. It is difficult for people when they live in a particular area and do not speak the language of the predominant culture. Not knowing the language can contribute to the social isolation which is a serious issue for persons with disabilities, who may find it “more challenging anyways to open up relationships with people and talk to people.”

## **5. Poverty**

It is important to consider the interplay of poverty, disability, and physical access issues as persons go about their daily lives. An example of this, described by the coordinator, is how mobility-impaired persons might have to deal with issues around food and nutrition. First, housing might not be appropriate to enable them to cook in their kitchens because of accessibility problems. Second, they may lack the energy to cook due to fatigue from other demands (such as work or the nature of their disability). Third, having to order out compounds the problems of poverty, as it is costly. Fourth, people may not even have easy access to a place where they can buy or order food. They may require transportation to a fast-food outlet, which is an additional cost and may not be readily available. Fifth, if they are eating out

frequently, then they are likely consuming high fat foods or foods of poor nutritional quality, which may compromise health in such a way as to impact on their disability.

## **6. Unemployment**

For persons with disabilities, finding a job can be particularly challenging. The coordinator described unemployment as high among the consumers she works with.

### **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

#### **1. Roles**

##### **Broad Definition of Disability**

The coordinator explained that the agency utilizes the following broad definition of disability: “Disability is defined as the loss or limitation of opportunities that prevent people who have impairments from taking part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers. Impairment is the lack of part or all of a limb or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body.”

##### **Individual Support and Advocacy**

The coordinator’s job is to provide person-to-person support and advocacy for persons with physical disabilities in North York. Most of the people she works with are adults. Although the mandate of the organization is to work with all age groups, other services are available in the area for children. Some clients live independently, others live independently but with attendant care, some with families, some are in institutions and residential settings. The types of homes they live in is often related to care requirements.

The coordinator’s involvement with the person varies depending on the nature of the issue to be dealt with. Involvement can be crisis-based, short-term, or long-term. “Sometimes it’s maintaining a relationship. Because people are really isolated . . . and just making sure that I know what’s going on in terms of their lives because they’re at risk, medically at risk, psychologically at risk.”

##### **Partnership Relationship**

A consumer-driven, individualized partnership approach is at the core of how this agency responds to problems such as those listed in the previous section. The consumers control the initial contact with the agency, the focus of the issues to be addressed, the overall approach to be taken, and the involvement of other agencies. The coordinator elaborated: “The assumption is that in the context of that partnership that people are taking control of their lives. Basically we work together and that’s what we do to address issues.”

#### **2. Initiatives**

##### **Barrier-free Kitchen**

The agency is building a barrier-free kitchen and will be able to offer programs around food preparation to people with disabilities. It was felt that this can help people to live more independently. It would offer participants the opportunities to prepare food and take it home, an alternative to buying prepared food or to services such as Meals on Wheels. Social contact would also be an important component of this service.

### **Employment**

The agency has taken steps to examine and develop employment-related services. While they applied for funding to improve their employment services (such as having support workers, a career bank, and job finding club), they were unsuccessful in obtaining it. They do offer a resource room. The current focus is to link people up with other employment resources. While there are many resources in the community, it is often important to provide a “bridging” function to them.

The coordinator is also investigating funding opportunities in partnership with another organization for bridging and other issues related to employment of persons with disabilities. “I wish we could get more involved employment wise, because I’m not convinced that generic services are all that accessible all the time for the people I work with. Sometimes I think all of us off the street find those services not that accessible so sometimes individualized or specialized services that provide bridging roles more than I can do are really important . . . I wish we could do more in that area because it’s one of these issues in terms of the whole poverty cycle.”

### **Finances and Service Access**

People are assisted on an individual basis to interact with Social Services, with processes such as applications and appeals for welfare, FBA, or Wheel Trans.

### **Housing**

The agency is sponsoring workshops on housing issues with a community advocate and a housing advocate. The purpose of the workshops is to have people come together to identify their own issues and to organize what they want to do, which might be around their individual living situation or might be more broad based -- for example, looking at housing problems in the province. For persons with disabilities, issues of housing and access at the individual level are often intertwined. The coordinator helps consumers sort out their individual housing concerns through activities such as applying for alternative housing.

### **Physical Accessibility**

Physical accessibility issues are dealt with on an individual basis. These often relate to accessibility of homes. Possible solutions might be renovations, or assisting a person to apply for and move to an accessible apartment. Funding for renovations through programs such as RRAP (Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program) has decreased recently, which means there are fewer resources available to assist with renovation costs.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

## **The Consumers**

The consumers were identified as one of the best supports for the coordinator's work: "The people I work with are just amazing, even with the barriers that they are experiencing, they've just got a lot of courage. They've sure taught me a lot about advocacy . . . they've had to live a life of trying to fight and survive for services and for pretty basic needs."

## **Links with Other Agencies**

In terms of working in an integrated model of service provision (that is, a model in which the emphasis is not on providing all services in-house, but in assisting persons to access available services), links with other services become especially important. There are numerous resources in Toronto and much of the coordinator's work is to link people with resources that exist. Examples of these resources include Participation Apartments and other organizations with accessible housing, Metro Housing and other subsidized housing, Job Quest and Corbrook Enterprises, and residential facilities.

## **System Advocates and the Consumer Movement**

The agency made a decision to focus on individual advocacy, but its work is supported by organizations who are involved in systemic advocacy for persons with physical disabilities and other social issues. Examples of such groups include ARCH, the Canadian Paraplegic Association, and various City coalitions organized around parenting or political issues.

In addition, the consumer movement for people with disabilities acts as a support for advocacy work in a partnership model. "Generally the consumer movement for people with physical disabilities has been alive and well since the '70s and people have really taken control of the process in exciting ways and so the services become different."

## **2. Barriers**

### **Limited Funding and Resources**

Funding issues and limited resources were identified as a major barrier. In a climate where government cutbacks are occurring, there are implications at the service level. These cutbacks also affect individuals by limiting their incomes and making housing more difficult to obtain.

Within the agency, the resources allocated to deal with the issue of advocating for persons with disabilities is limited. This limits the number of consumers to be assisted and the types of initiatives that can be offered (for example, limits to more initiatives in the areas of employment or recreation).

### **Limits to Accessible Housing**

Limits in the amount of available housing, and the funds for home renovation, constitute a barrier when so many of the needs are related to finding affordable, accessible accommodation.

### **Philosophical Changes: Integrated Service Delivery Model**

With the consumer movement of persons with disabilities has come a focus on accessing generic services, versus development of specialized or segregated services. And in general this change has been extremely positive. Yet there are people who would prefer segregated services. The dilemma becomes one of allegiance to a integrated service delivery model versus an allegiance to some consumers' preferences. For example, recreational programs for persons with disabilities were disbanded when a needs survey showed that this was no longer a priority for the people being served. And now, some consumers themselves are asking for such programs again. Even if the agency had the resources to offer this service, there remains a philosophical question as to whether they should.

**Community Quality of Life Interview**  
**Executive Director**  
**Somali Women's Organization**  
**September, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Access to Amenities**

One of the most important positive factors contributing to quality of life of the Somali community in the Lawrence Heights area is its close proximity to amenities, including the community health centre, shopping, subways, and schools. However, the executive director was careful to say that these things make life “easier” for people but not “good” because language barriers tend to override the convenience of being near to resources.

**2. Practical Support within Somali Community**

The Somali community supports each other by offering practical assistance with the challenges of daily life. For example, the women often support each other by arranging for one of their members with good English skills to accompany another member with limited skills to the hospital or doctor.

**3. Social Support within Somali Community**

The other major factor which contributes to positive quality of life is the social support that the Somali community members offer each other. For example, as a large Muslim community, the Somalis get together on Fridays to read the Koran. This is not only a religious but also a social gathering, giving people a chance to get together, share a meal, and discuss their problems.

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Communication Barriers with Agencies and Resources**

Communication with agencies can be challenging in itself for people unfamiliar with the Canadian system, and is compounded because many of the Somali women cannot speak English. Because of this, they find it difficult to communicate with community resources such as schools and the community health centre to express their opinions and concerns.

**2. Crime and Safety**

There are issues of personal safety in the Somali community in terms of how free people feel to move around or to let their children play freely. Sometimes their children are involved in fights with other children in the community, and there is the perception that some of these fights are related to gang activity. “They feel that they have to keep their children at home, not playing with other kids.” People also feel that they can't walk on the streets at certain hours of the night.

**3. Drugs**

Drugs are a concern for the Somali community, especially for their children. They feel that their children are being exposed to drugs. People have reported to that they frequently observe marijuana being used by youths on the streets.

#### **4. Inadequate School Resources for Refugee Children**

The feeling that school resources are inadequate for the needs of refugee children is a serious concern of the Somali community. Many of the Somali children arrive in Canada with no previous experience of school because they come from refugee camps. In addition, they are not familiar with English. Families may be broken up (temporarily or permanently). The executive director described the difficulties some Somali children and their parents face: “One child actually told me the other day-- he was at Lawrence Heights-- ‘it’s like being in a club that everybody’s laughing and having fun and you are the only one sitting aside and nobody wants to talk to you and nobody wants to do anything’. So a lot of children don’t want to go to school which a lot of parents don’t know how to deal with . . . it’s a very stressful situation.”

Children may be offered ESL (English as a Second Language) classes but these classes are designed primarily for students who have experience with school, thus the focus is on the acquisition of language skills and the additional support they need to fit into the school system is not available. Children are usually placed into age-appropriate classes, rather than classes at their educational level. Schools often have a limited understanding about the background of the children, and teachers may not be equipped to work with these students. Sometimes the children are labeled as having a learning disability, a label which is frightening and misunderstood by parents. Services such as booster classes (classes based on the students’ educational ability, rather than their age group) and heritage classes are not available through the educational system. In fact, there was concern expressed that ESL programs might be in jeopardy, given the changes occurring in the education system at present.

#### **5. Lack of Neighbourhood Belonging**

A problem that the Somali community faces is that many Somalis do not feel welcome in their neighbourhood. There is a perception among some Somalis that people do not like them being there, and that they are different from their neighbours. This perception is also fed by their experiences of misunderstandings with neighbours. While some of these misunderstanding can be worked out, sometimes, “we’ve had complaints and we try to do mediation and nothing works.”

Sometimes this feeling that Somalis are not welcomed or are misunderstood translates into a fear for safety. The executive director finds it difficult to differentiate whether the fear comes from actual events or just an inner feeling that the Somalis are different from their neighbours.

#### **6. Parent-Child Communication**

Related to the issue of helping children integrate into school is the more general issue that parents are experiencing difficulty communicating with their children. Parents may be trying to cope with children who are adapting to a new culture faster than they are. Parents may not see the more rapid adaptation of their children to the culture as a positive factor, because they see their children adapting to bad habits like smoking, drugs, or violence. In addition, many parents are trying to cope with children who are rebelling against going to school.

## **7. Parents' Relationships with Schools**

The whole area of the interaction between parents and the school system is a serious concern for the Somali community, and is the most pervasive problem the executive director deals with. Parents, many of them single mothers trying to cope with large families, are unfamiliar with the language and with the structure of the schools. Schools in their turn are unfamiliar with the backgrounds of the parents and children and may have expectations of children that they cannot meet. Schools may contact families and feel that the parents are not helping their children with schoolwork and with integrating into the school system generally. At times, parents are informed that their children are learning disabled, a term which they may equate with mental illness or other disability. Parents end up feeling that the schools are pushing their children out of the school or actually creating mental health problems.

## **8. Perceived Lack of Support from Somali Agencies**

There is a perception that with help of liaisons or workers, many communication issues could be solved. However, these services are not available to Somalis on a widespread basis, particularly in the Lawrence Heights community. "A lot of people from the Lawrence Heights area call us and they are always saying, 'why don't we have a Somali person in the area working with us on our issues?' They feel not only left out of the mainstream, they feel Somali agencies as well abandon them. And it's very difficult when you feel like you're abandoned by everybody."

## **9. Poor Condition and Maintenance of Homes**

A major problem in this community is the poor condition of the homes. In general, the housing stock is old and in poor repair. A related problem is that the Housing Authority has been seen to be slow to respond to requests for repairs. Complaints to the Housing Authority about problems with the repair of the homes are often not dealt with unless an agency intervenes.

## **10. Underhousing**

A number of the Somali families are underhoused, living in dwellings meant for fewer people. This might occur because the family is not able to immigrate all at the same time and so is assigned a dwelling based on the size of the family unit which first arrives in Canada. Alternative housing is difficult to obtain from Metro Housing because of long waiting lists. The only alternatives are market-value homes, which people cannot afford.

## **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

### **1. Roles**

The mandate of the organization is to help Somali women and children to settle. The settlement process involves working with the schools and neighbourhood resources. "What we do is help the community use their services and neighbourhood resources better." Extensive use is made of links to neighbourhood resources, and to other community resources for Somalis.

There are five staff and a large volunteer core. Funding is mainly from the private sector, although the organization has been funded by the government for particular projects. The Ministry of Housing funded them for several projects related to housing; Trillium Foundation currently funds a

Somali Families and Student Support Project in Scarborough, which has the highest concentration of Somalis in the Metro area.

## **2. Initiatives**

### **Education**

The organization has made numerous efforts to address the education issues, both in terms of facilitating communication and in developing appropriate resources for the children. At present, much of the effort is focused in Scarborough. The Somali Families and Student Support project helps parents understand the school system through workshops, information sessions, and one to one counselling. Service is also provided for children, including counselling and tutoring. Training is also provided to teachers about the situation of students. Sometimes the organization's workers sit in on student assessments and provide advice.

In Lawrence Heights, the organization responds to requests of individuals or schools for mediation. They try to bridge the gap between parents and schools, schools and students, and parents and students. Volunteers are also available to help individuals work through problems.

### **Housing**

The organization works in the area of housing taking both an individualized and a community approach. It has helped individuals obtain repairs from Metro Housing. In addition, they have met with the head of Metro Housing and presented a summary of the issues. The result of this meeting is that they were "promised a lot of things" and given a list of appropriate contact persons within the Housing office, which has assisted them to solve problems more effectively.

### **Linkages**

Linkages with other agencies for advocacy and service provision are seen as important to the work of the organization, in order to use resources efficiently and facilitate a coordinated approach to issues. Examples of linkages include other Somali organizations such as Midaynta, North York Somali Support Group, and Somaliland Canadian Society. Often groups will work collectively on issues.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Linkages**

The linkages described above, as well as those with community resources, are important supports to the work of the organization. In particular, linkages with schools and the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre have been very beneficial.

#### **Volunteers**

The organization's volunteers are very committed and a strong support. They bring with them familiarity with the issues as well as the language. "A lot of them went through these problems so they know first hand what these problems are. They know how to deal with it because a lot of them dealt with it and survived."

### **2. Barriers**

#### **Funding**

There are new demands on the organization all the time, and resources are finite. Thus they are forced to set priorities in terms of both problems and geographical focus. This means that at present, they tend to focus on the Scarborough area, which has the largest population of Somalis.

#### **Broad Mandate**

The broad mandate of the organization, both geographical and in terms of settlement issues, combines with the funding issue to create further barriers. For example, the perception in Lawrence Heights is that the Somali community there is not as well served as the Somali community in other areas.

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Vice-Principal  
Elementary School  
June, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Access to Amenities**

It was felt that within the Lawrence Heights community children have access to various amenities. These include: parks, libraries, shopping malls, public transportation and schools. "There is a lot of greenery and parks, the children like the parks. The children also have access to transportation at a young age which enables them to go to middle school and/or high school."

**2. Committed Staff**

The vice-principal felt that the teaching staff at her school were very committed. "We have a very vibrant community of teachers, they are young and dedicated. We are a great team of people working together."

**3. Diversity**

Another strength identified by the vice-principal is the community's diversity. She stated that "There is a huge difference in the socio-cultural background of this community. Everything south of Lawrence and Eglinton is quite affluent, while the other side is quite urban and poor. This is a very diverse community that results in a good mix of children."

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Crime and Safety**

It was stated that there were issues related to violence and crime, especially among those children who live in subsidized housing and are bussed in to the school. "The children talk about the violence they see around them and the need to defend themselves from it. For example, an eight year old girl told me that she had to defend herself with her mouth because she lived in the 'jungle'. There is a fear of violence, it could be family violence or outside violence, they just don't feel secure. There is a difference between the two groups of students." The vice-principal also commented: "I drove a kid home and he told me to be careful because there was a lot of crime in his neighbourhood. We see the impact of these factors on the children through their behaviours and their perceptions."

**School Responses**

The school responds to the issue of violence and crime by ensuring that the school environment is a place where the children feel safe. They work at making the school environment a safe haven for the children, a place where they will feel secure and develop a sense of pride. Verbal and physical abuse are not tolerated within the school.

The children are also being given strategies on how to avoid violence. “All of the adults and students are taught skills in conflict resolution and problem-solving. We have seen improvement in the children’s behaviour, as the number of violent incidents has decreased.”

## **2. Issues of Neglect**

Neglect is a serious issue that impacts on the children’s ability to learn. “For example, some children come to school hungry. We do not know if it is an issue of neglect or poverty. Many parents are working and going to school. The lives of these children are difficult; they are going to daycare before seven a.m. and back to daycare after school. We have also had situations where children are left behind and we try to contact somebody but no one is willing to take responsibility for the child, however these are extreme cases.”

### **School Responses**

The school responds to possible neglect by offering support programs that address more than just the academic needs of the children. The vice-principal explained that the mandate of the school is “not only to look after the educational needs of the children but we are aware that the total needs of the child need to be taken care of if they are to benefit from their education. Therefore, the physical and emotional needs are also a priority.”

The school meets the emotional and physical needs through services such as the snack program. “This is a community issue and parents should be involved but we have to take the initiative. We support the parents by identifying the problems, contacting agencies and organizing information sessions. However, we need grassroots involvement. We can initiate the programs and be supportive, but unless the programs are taken over by the community they will not be successful. We have to find someone else to continue the programs otherwise we cannot fulfill our educational mandate.”

## **3. Lack of Funds**

Throughout the interview the vice-principal stated that the school board does not have sufficient funding to support extra programs such as snack programs.

### **School Responses**

The school responds to cutbacks by obtaining funding from local businesses. The school has been rather successful at obtaining funds for extra programs for the children. For example, for the snack program “we received funding quite easily and faster than we anticipated. There are many opportunities for getting funds from outside agencies, it is not that difficult.”

## **4. Single Parent Families**

Many of the children come from single parent families and the school deals with issues related to this. Many of the single parents are young mothers: “Some of the mothers are in their teens and their children are four or five. There is a lot of instability, as the number of caregivers is constantly changing. Sometimes we do not know who the caregiver is.”

## **5. Tension Among Students**

The school is situated in an affluent neighbourhood however, the children who are bussed in are from poorer areas. One of the issues that the school deals with is “. . . tension between the different groups which can be difficult. We often hear negative comments about children who are bussed to our school.”

### **School Responses**

It is a priority of the school to reduce the tension between the two groups of students. One of the school’s goals focuses on “building a community of learning at the school where children come from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. We are a community trying to develop initiatives to reinforce their self-esteem and a sense of belonging.” The vice-principal recognizes that this tension also has impacts outside of school.

### **C. Roles and Initiatives of the School**

The vice-principal described the role of the school as much more than academic. “We are not only looking after the educational needs of the children as we are aware that the total needs of the child need to be taken care of if they are to benefit from their education.” In addition, she spoke about the role of the school in the community. “We have a role to play in the community, we need to build relationships with local agencies and by coordinating our efforts we will be more efficient. We will be better able to address the needs of the children.”

She also spoke about providing the children with skills in order to become better citizens in society. “This is a community trying to develop initiatives to reinforce their self-esteem, and a sense of belonging in that they have a role to play in the school. We are teaching children to be advocates. We facilitate the development of problem-solving skills and confidence in order to become better citizens.”

The school’s academic expectations are quite high as it values academic results. The school has had the largest improvements across the school board. “I think our children have an amazing potential. They are going to have a big impact on their community and on their environment. We need to give them the opportunity now even though they are in grade six and only 11 years old. Most of them have very sophisticated thinking and are not at all naïve. If we spend energy with them it will pay off, they are where we should start in trying to build our community.”

### **Enhancing the Physical Environment**

As the school is being renovated, the vice-principal spoke about the importance of the physical environment. “The calmer and more beautiful the environment is the more receptive the children will be to learning. The new school will also have kitchen facilities open to the community that will facilitate community building. We want to turn the school into an activity centre for the community.” One of the projects that the vice-principal has been involved in is building an arboretum in the new school. “We are trying to make a beautiful environment by planting trees in our new school.” This will hopefully instill a sense of respect and appreciation of the natural environment.

## **National Quality Institute Certificate of Merit**

In 1997, the school underwent an evaluation process with the National Quality Institute. The school was the winning submission in the category of Education and received a Certificate of Merit.

## **School Advisory Council**

Last year, the school began an Advisory Council. This initiative will provide the children with an opportunity to develop leadership skills. In addition, the children are involved in addressing community issues. For example, last year the children were involved in reaching out to newcomers in the community.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Community Partnerships**

The vice-principal noted that many local agencies and business have been supportive of the school's programs. "Many different organizations have been supportive of our efforts such as Canada Trust, the Lion's Club and local grocery stores. Partnerships with other agencies have also assisted in coordinating the school's efforts to meet the children's needs. Some of these agencies are: Dellcrest Centre, other local schools, police and the Children's Aid Society.

#### **Continued Progress**

For the vice-principal and the other staff, seeing progress and results is encouraging: "We have seen better results academically, a growing sense of community, and greater parental involvement which is encouraging and reinforces our efforts."

#### **North York Board of Education**

The North York Board of Education was acknowledged as providing the school with support from administrators.

#### **School Staff**

The staff were described as being "a very vibrant community of teachers, very young and dedicated, they are a great team of people. We work hard but we do worry about the potential for burnout."

### **2. Barriers**

A number of barriers interfere with the school's attempts to provide a supportive learning environment for the students. The vice-principal identified the lack of government support, lack of parental involvement, and distrust in the school as barriers to the school's efforts. Finally, language barriers can also pose difficulties in teaching children and communicating with parents.

#### **Community Quality of Life Interview**

##### **Teacher**

**Middle School**  
**June, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Access to Stores**

It was mentioned that there is good access to shopping in the community. Additionally, a number of students work at the local Lawrence Square mall.

**2. Community Agencies and Resources**

It was mentioned that there are many community services in and around the Lawrence Heights community. For example, there is the Scott Mission, the Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre and the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre. Families are often connected to a number of organizations within the community, and some children have been attending programs at the same organization since they were young.

**3. Public Transportation**

Good public transportation was seen as positive factor of this community, especially since it is on the subway line. "With Yorkdale and the subway and everything being quite close by, it's quite a nice community for them to be able to get around in."

**4. Stable Community**

The teacher described the Lawrence Heights community as very stable. Many of the children will complete elementary, middle and high school in this community. This enables teachers to have a lot of information about the students. The teacher felt that the children feel "comfortable in this stability, because they know a lot of individuals very intimately and families are good friends . . . They are very tight-knit communities."

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Crime and Safety**

There is a concern about crime and safety. Within the community there have been shootings. The children have told their teacher about hearing gunshots and seeing knives at parties. There have been incidents of police chases in the school.

**2. Drugs and Substance Abuse**

There have been problems with drugs and substance abuse in the school and in the community at large. Some students have had substance abuse difficulties in the form of inhalants and glue sniffing. Drugs or alcohol do not come into the school to the same extent, although they are "certainly out in the community".

**3. Exposure to Violence**

It was felt that many children in the school are exposed to violence in a number of forms. For example, on a bridge close the school, a woman was severely beaten by her husband. Many of the children witnessed this or saw the commotion with the police afterwards.

Some students are concerned with individual family violence. Some children have disclosed violence or abuse at home. Students talk about beatings at home or being severely punished, or they know other children that are having to go through severe beatings. “I think that some of the more significant violence is a part of their lives . . . Violence, in a number of different ways, is a reality for them.”

#### **4. Family Responsibilities**

The teacher noted that some children who are the older siblings, may have to take on a great deal of responsibility in the home, helping with the younger siblings. Taking on these responsibilities can be very stressful.

#### **5. Insularity of the Community**

One of the issues the teacher experiences with the children from this community is their lack of exposure to a variety of experiences. Typically the children from the Lawrence Heights community tend to stay in the area and do not have exposure to some of the places, activities and events elsewhere in the city, including cultural events, arts activities and universities. She explained how the strong sense of community belonging has both positive and negative aspects: “I think sometimes it [the community] tends to be too cloistered and too close knit, so that there's maybe a little suffocation within its own neighbourhood, instead of branching out. So the same thing that makes the community really powerful in a lot of ways, and it doesn't have a lot of mobility, also helps it to stagnate a little bit.”

#### **6. Students' Conduct**

Daily conduct in the school remains a concern for the teacher and her colleagues. Students' displaying lack of respect for education, for each other and for the teachers is something on which the school continues to work. The school is presently developing a behaviour code that would be acceptable to the students, parents and teachers. This includes having appropriate rewards and consequences to help the students keep their conduct within acceptable boundaries.

#### **7. Varying Cultural Expectations in Families**

The teacher discussed the issue of “cultural carryover”. She explained that in some families, where the parents came to Canada a number of years ago and the children have spent most of their lives here, the cultural expectations of the parents may be very different from the cultural expectations of the school and neighbourhood. These conflicting ideas can create difficulties for the children, for the parents and for the school.

### **C. School Roles and Initiatives**

#### **1. Addressing Issues of Concern**

Through their language program, teachers address adolescent concerns such as the pangs of growing up, responsibilities, gender issues, drug abuse and violence. The teacher elaborated that students and teachers discuss “making wrong choices and getting involved in illegal activities, versus making the right choices and being a strong individual for yourself . . . That's one of our underlying messages as a staff to the children, to really help them make better choices.”

## **2. Exposing Students to Wider Experiences**

The teacher felt that it is important to expose the students to a range of experiences, especially outside the Lawrence Heights community. “I think that the more exposure we can give them to those kind of activities, we can help them improve the quality of life for the community by getting out of the community.”

## **3. Help for Low Income Families**

The teacher reported how the school assists students with issues related to poverty and low income. For example, a daily lunch, shoes and clothing, may be difficult for the families of a few students to provide. These students may be subsidized by the school for a variety of things. As well, the company that provides the school's lunch program recently started a free breakfast program. Very few students attended, although the teacher felt there are many students who would benefit from it.

## **4. Improving Academic Skills of the Students**

It was reported that many of the students are below level in reading, writing and math compared to other students within the system. This can be due to second language learning or other difficulties. The teacher expressed that it is important for teachers to work hard to bring the students' academics to a comparable level with students at other schools in the system. The school has a very strong literacy program to help with this. The teacher stressed the importance of academic success for these children: “I think that if we don't set them up for success academically we are going to be injuring their quality of life.”

## **5. Making the School a Positive Place**

The teacher saw the school as working to be a positive place, to counteract some of the negatives in the community and in society, including violence. “We've become a positive place for them to be.” She specifically identified the teachers as being good role models. As well, the school's activities, both academic and sports-related, are seen as giving students something they can work towards, instead of becoming involved in the more negative aspects of the community. For the children who disclose violence or abuse at home, the staff strive to be seen by the children as people that support them and advocate for them.

## **6. Staff Sensitivity and Skills**

The school hires staff who will work well with the challenges the students from this neighbourhood bring. The staff try to be conscious of the different types of students and their needs, be sensitive to difficulties that might be occurring, and set the academic and guidance programs accordingly. There is a

tone set in the school that the teachers can work appropriately with all the concerns. The school has a strong staff advisor guidance program and an intervention program, where students who are having difficulty can access guidance counselling.

### **7. Staff Support and Availability**

The staff were seen as being very dedicated and supportive. For example, they are there for some students who arrive at the school soon after seven in the morning for sports activities. Also, many teachers are available until five or later in the evening, especially through the winter months. There are also special lunch-time activities including house league, basketball, computers and library.

### **8. Substance Abuse Counselling**

The school has helped the children involved with inhalants receive counselling at the Hospital for Sick Children.

### **9. Work with Other Agencies and Organizations**

The school has collaborated with many other agencies and organizations. They have worked with Harambees in the past, but cutbacks have decreased that this year. The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre has provided presentations to the students on health and communicating with parents. The Caribbean Youth Association has been coming in to work with young women this year. The Trails organization works with potential leaders: children who are seen as having some significant abilities and who could benefit from some time away. They provide weekends away with their staff, which include goal setting activities, visiting universities, and exposing children to different things. Many of the staff have worked with the Children's Aid Society when abuse is occurring in the home.

### **10. Work with Parents**

The school works closely with parents. As the teacher explained: "We need their assistance and only together can we make a difference for the kids . . . We work very closely in partnership and more so for the children that need it more." The teacher felt that the school is working in greater partnership with parents now that a school advisory committee has been established. They listen carefully to what the committee believes needs to be done in the school. As well, the school sometimes works individually with parents. The staff conveys the message to parents that consistent boundaries are needed. One of the things the teacher finds most helpful is "parents that are right behind us to help us manage things and will support us to have homework done or behaviour concerns [addressed] or counselling done if need be."

## **C. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Parents**

Parents were seen as strong support to the teachers and the school. The partnerships between parents, teachers and administrators were described as the "people power that is driving our efforts."

## **Staff at the School**

The teacher spoke very highly of the school's staff and felt they were the key support. "The number one ingredient I would say are the individuals within the school . . . We have one of the most committed and energetic and enthusiastic staff I've ever worked with. People are ready to give 110% every day."

## **Students**

Another support and what really motivates the teacher are the students "who really want to get ahead and are committed and dedicated to learning. They will be able to break a lot of the barriers simply because they have the desire and attitude to do so. I truly believe that."

## **2. Barriers**

### **Access to Computer Technology**

Lack of access to computer technology has become a barrier for this school. Other schools in the system have more access to high end technological equipment through fundraising or donations.

### **Government Cutbacks**

Almost one third of the students are identified with special education needs, and special programs require a small teacher-pupil ratio. The classes at Lawrence Heights are smaller than in other schools because the school has been designated a special needs school. This is based on the demographics of the neighbourhood (e.g., mobility, language, income level). This designation helps maintain a smaller staff-student ratio. However, government cutbacks have led to a decrease in staff.

## **Parents**

It was felt that sometimes when parents and teachers reach a certain point in their relationship, parents stop working in partnership with the teacher. The parent may decide not to support the actions that the teacher believes will be helpful for the child. These actions are often difficult for a parent to accept.

## **Community Quality of Life Interview Teacher Secondary School June, 1997**

### **A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

#### **1. Access to Amenities**

It was felt that the accessibility of amenities within the school's catchment area was a positive factor for students. Among these amenities, the teacher mentioned adequate commercial facilities, such

as Yorkdale mall and small independent stores. A number of parks and recreation facilities that are available in the community were cited as being important to students.

The teacher explained that all of these amenities were not within the specific geographic boundaries of the Lawrence Heights community. This was not seen as problematic for students: “People don't feel restricted by the boundaries of Lawrence Heights when they utilize the facilities that are available in the community at large.” He noted that within Lawrence Heights, there is a recreation centre and a park which students can use.

## **2. Cultural Diversity**

The diversity of people was identified as another positive attribute of this community. It was noted that students of the same ethnic background tended to hang around together. In general, however, the teacher did not feel that ethnic diversity caused racial tension among students. This is indicated in his statement: “There's a strength in the fact that there's a multi-ethnic community, a multi-racial community. You don't see any significant degree of tension in the school as a result of that. In fact, it's a well-blended, positive environment.”

## **3. Local Commercial Area Provides Jobs for students**

The local commercial area was viewed as positive because it provides part-time jobs for students. The teacher shared the results of a classroom survey regarding students' jobs: “Eighty per cent of the students in the senior levels have part-time jobs. Students work in retail and service industries, and in the light industrial services.” He did note, however, that this availability of jobs is also a problem for reasons which will be explored in the next section.

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Crime**

The teacher stated there was a high crime element in the community which was encouraged by the presence of adult gangs. He was disturbed by students' tolerance of crime as indicated by this statement: “Students don't perceive it as a high crime element. That's part of the problem. It's normal for them. Of course people steal.”

Concern was expressed about the impact of this tolerance on students' socialization with people from other cultures in their community: “There's a cultural environment that tolerates high levels of petty crime, and it's seen as normal and acceptable. It contributes to the ghettoisation of groups by ethnicity. The idea that ‘We look after each other and screw everybody else really mitigates against good quality of health, and I see that present here.”

### **2. Education Not Valued**

According to the teacher, the combination of: (i) limited opportunities for students, (ii) tolerance of gangs and crime, and (iii) a lack of parental involvement, contributes to education not being valued by students. He explained that for many parents from this working class community, day-to-day economics are more of an immediate concern. As a result, parents may not strongly encourage their teenagers' educational pursuits. The presence of adult gang members also contributes to students' devaluing the importance of education.

The teacher contrasted these attitudes towards education with students of another local Catholic school: “At that school, you don’t have to teach them the value of education. They’ve got that instilled from their family, from their home.” He reiterated the idea that students’ ambitions and opportunities become limited when education is not valued.

### **3. Few Opportunities to Celebrate Ethnicity**

Although he viewed the ethnic diversity within Lawrence Heights as a positive attribute of this community, the teacher felt there were limited opportunities for students to celebrate their own ethnicity. He made the distinction between people taking pride in their ethnic backgrounds, and people actually celebrating their culture through events or activities. He elaborated by stating: “Although people have their historical language, that seems to be about the limit of it. It reduces your ethnicity not to a cultural heritage to be proud of, but just as a way of identifying with a smaller group. That doesn’t bring the full richness of it out.”

#### **Educator and School Responses**

In the classroom, the teacher helps students build links with their own ethnic communities, as a tangible way of expressing pride in their ethnic backgrounds. He shared the example of students becoming involved with community groups for their course Society: Challenge and Change. During the term, students volunteered with a community organization of their choice. At the end of the course, they wrote a full report on the organization, including their personal reflections of the volunteer experience.

The teacher explained that some of his Hispanic students gained valuable insights from their experiences of working with the Centre for Spanish-Speaking Peoples and other centres. He summarized their experiences by stating: “Some of my students volunteered as translators to work with recent immigrants, to help them through the maze of bureaucracy. It got them involved in their community that they weren’t involved in before.”

### **4. Gangs**

The teacher identified ethnically-based gangs in the community as a problem. He has observed adult gang members trying to recruit high school students. He framed his concerns in the following questions: “When you see somebody with a beeper, the question arises why does that person need a beeper? Are they being used to steal things? Is it connected with some drug deals?”

According to the teacher, ethnically-based gangs also complicate students’ understanding of cultural diversity and mutuality: “These gangs tend to be racially or ethnically based, which creates an environment that mitigates against community building. It ghettoizes people into thinking their safety is with their own group.”

#### **Educator and School Responses**

As a coach for Bantam basketball, the teacher has tried to introduce students on the team to other role models: “On Friday nights after games, I’d take them out downtown somewhere. Let them out of what the kids call ‘the jungle’. Let them see another aspect of society. I take them to hear Black speakers. Those gang members aren’t the only role models in the community. Let’s look at the broader community.”

Some of the staff at the school were also viewed as positive role models. “Some of the black staff are great. They're really supportive. Some of the kids can relate to them. They're good alternative role models.”

### **5. Lack of Parental Involvement**

Although he identified the school's Parents Council as a concerned, involved group, in general, he saw lack of parental involvement as a problem. This lack of involvement was evident during Parents Night: “Parents Night here is probably the worst attended of any school I've ever worked in, which reflects to me, a lack of valuing of education on the part of students' personal support community.”

### **6. Limitations of Some Amenities**

Although the teacher described access to amenities for students as being generally good, he mentioned some notable limitations. He noted that the Lawrence Heights community was more limited in terms of TTC service, as buses close down at seven o'clock in the evening. He also identified the lack of a good public library in the community as a problem for students doing research for school projects.

### **7. Limited Cultural Opportunities**

Students' cultural exposure was described as limited. It was felt that students were limited to what was available through the mass media. In the teacher's words: “There's nothing seen beyond the immediate commercially available sources. Culture is what you hear on the radio or watch on TV. What is easily available, easily accessible, mass-marketed.”

### **8. Limiting Career Opportunities**

While he was able to identify some benefits for students having part-time jobs, it was felt that these jobs detracted from students' time for academic or recreational pursuits. The teacher explained that part-time work in the local service and light industrial areas limited students' ambitions and scope of opportunities. He described some students' attitudes: “I can get a job working construction with my uncle's company here. I can get a job at the auto body shop. I can get a job at the Rubbermaid plastics plant. I've got work, I'm fine.”

The teacher described his concern as an educator: “We know these are very transient occupations. These are not good career choices. Although in school, they've got the opportunity to do it, often they wind up later on suffering because of the limited scope they allowed themselves to have.”

### **9. Low Self-esteem**

The teacher shared the results of a self-esteem inventory which he conducted with one of his classes, to illustrate the significance of the issue of low self-esteem among students. He reported that the average score was quite low, which may be partly reflective of every day struggles with adolescence. However, he believed that these students had particular difficulties with their self-worth: “Part of that is a reflection of limited scope of opportunity, limited sense of value of self. Within the school, there's that constant awareness of trying to raise self-esteem, raise value of self. Then you can start valuing education and other things you can achieve.”

## **Educator and School Responses**

As one way of promoting self-esteem, the school offers a course where senior level students tutor other students: “We have the Peer Ministry program/Peer Tutor program, with students helping students.” Students in the course tutor younger students, peers, or special needs students who have physical or intellectual/developmental disabilities. This program is seen as valuable to all students involved: “The Peer Ministry program raises self-esteem. It raises a sense of value of education, a value of the work they’re doing.”

More generally, the school tries to promote students' self-worth by offering students opportunities to exploit their own talents and interests. The teacher described the school's music program as a fifth period after school, which appeals to many students. He also described the school's computer program as quite extensive: “There are full-fledged tech opportunities. Students work with the different aspects of technology. It can be very career-oriented and allows for a very creative outlet.”

### **10. Poverty**

The teacher identified poverty as a significant issue for many of his students. He expressed concern about the impact of poverty on students' education. He shared the example of asking students to analyse data for a class project, and one student asking to borrow a calculator to complete the project. “It’s a luxury, the eight dollars that it costs to go to Radio Shack to buy a calculator. They're in grade twelve and they've never been able to afford to buy a calculator.”

### **C. Roles and Initiatives of the School**

The teacher described the role of the school as much more than academic. He explained that the school tries to address the needs of each student in a wholistic manner. He summarized the roles of the school, both with individual students, and with the community as a whole: “To try to create well-rounded individuals. Especially as a Catholic school, that involves more than academic skills, athletics and social skills. It involves dealing with the human needs, the spiritual needs, the self-esteem needs, the self-awareness needs of individuals. As well as trying to build community, and trying to build links with the school, the community, the home, the parish in our case.”

#### **Centre for Deaf Education**

The school houses the city's Centre for Deaf Education. Within the school, there are specific classes for students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, as well as integrated classrooms with sign interpreters. The school is also equipped with flashing red lights as fire alarms, and close-captioned decoders. The teacher viewed deaf and hard-of-hearing students as an asset to the school: “Their presence really sensitizes people to the needs of the deaf community. They're not excluded and people treat them the same as anyone else.”

#### **Community Service Projects**

The school plans to expand its course with community service projects across all grades within the Religious Education Department. This is seen as valuable for two reasons. Firstly, the projects provide a way for students to involve themselves in community groups, such as the Centre for Spanish-speaking Peoples mentioned earlier. Secondly, the projects allow students to learn about community agencies and the services that are offered. As the teacher explained: “These projects promote the quality

of life for the students, because then they are forced to find what support services are available in the broader community and become involved in them.”

### **Think Fast**

In the classroom, the teacher has tried to broaden students' perspectives. He shared the example of the Think Fast project in which students raised money for development projects. He explained that students gained a broader world perspective from this project and their own efforts: “They’re educating themselves about the causes of poverty and what external forces are limiting. Also allowing them to have an opportunity to take some action on what they’ve learned.”

### **Walk Against Male Violence**

Another community-based initiative with which the school has become involved is the Walk Against Male Violence, a march that occurs in downtown Toronto. “Some of our students walked in it last year and this year. They raised money for local women's shelters. It also gives the students an opportunity to educate themselves about issues of violence and to be able to articulate their concerns.”

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Committed staff**

The teacher saw the teaching staff as being committed and supportive. He also described the administration and support staff as very helpful.

#### **Parents Council**

The teacher described the Parents Council as a hard-working group of parents. One example of their support was the meal they provided for students at the end of the Think Fast project.

#### **Support of Small Businesses**

Additionally, he gave credit to local small business owners who show their support by offering donations to school events like Think Fast. He contrasted the support of these owners with larger commercial chains: “The small businesses are good. The problem with the franchises in the mall is that there's no owner. They don't care. The guy who owns the restaurant down the street does.”

### **2. Barriers**

The teacher identified a number of barriers that interfere with the school's attempts to provide a supportive learning environment for students.

#### **Difficulty Meeting Individual Needs**

The teacher expressed concern over meeting students' individual needs in crowded classrooms, and with limited professional support staff: “We're starting to shove 36 kids into a classroom, so how do

you deal with relating with the personal needs? A positive aspect is that we do have a board psychologist whom we can refer kids to. The negative is we have one board psychologist. A positive aspect is we do have a social worker to deal with the crises that happen in kids' lives and families. The negative is we have one social worker.”

### **Gangs and Crime**

He reiterated the idea that the issues of gang presence, and a high crime element, act as barriers against learning. Gang members’ recruitment of students for stealing was cited as contributing to tolerance of petty crimes as part of their cultural environment. The teacher felt that students looked to adult gang members as role models, and by doing so, were not encouraged to look at other options for themselves.

### **Limited Educational Resources**

The teacher felt that the school library was inadequate for students completing research projects, as many of the books were outdated. In the classroom, a lack of books was viewed as very problematic. “We’re not talking high-tech stuff here. Books. We’re cutting the budget for books. There’s not enough for each student to have their own.”

### **Limited Physical Resources**

Limitations in physical resources, in terms of physical space and equipment, were also viewed as barriers. The teacher described his portable as a poor quality environment for students due to environmental hazards in the building. Equipment such as overhead projectors and televisions for educational videos were also limited.

### **Poverty**

It was felt that the lack of educational resources was very difficult on students from poorer backgrounds. These students cannot afford to purchase basic school equipment, such as pens, pencils and binders.

**Community Quality of Life Interview  
Recreation Worker  
Community Recreation Centre  
September, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Community Input into Decisions**

In terms of quality of life, it was felt that one of the most important things for community members must be their belief that they have the “power to change or influence the things that directly involve their day to day living.” This would include both the belief that they have valid input into decision making, and that there is a vehicle for them to do so. It was felt that this occurs in Lawrence Heights with the Resource Group and the Tenant Management Group, for example.

**2. Community Policing**

Community policing in Lawrence Heights was seen as a positive factor. While it is recognized that the budget for this service is limited, its presence in the community is seen as a “real plus.”

**3. Green Space**

The plentifulness of green space and trees in this community was also seen as a positive factor. It was felt that the green space in the community contributes to “a better sense of completeness and wellness.”

**4. Resource Group Collaboration**

For any community, collaboration of agencies is important, particularly when resources are tight. In Lawrence Heights a resource group of agencies and residents meets regularly to plan, ensure that there is no duplication, identify gaps, share resources efficiently, and form partnerships. This is seen as a positive factor for the community and a “unified vehicle” for all to voice their concerns.

**5. Tenant Management Group**

Another example of meaningful community input is the tenants group for Metro Toronto Housing in the area. This group, which is chaired by a resident, specifically deals with housing issues such as landlord-tenant issues, and repair needs.

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Housing: Poor Condition**

The poor condition of housing is a major issue in this community. Some buildings are definitely in need of repair. In addition they are seen as “gloomy and dingy, there’s not very much light coming through.”

**2. Population Density versus Resource Availability**

Another concern is that while the Lawrence Heights community might be growing, social services are not. At this point, there are not enough social services in the community to allow for increased density of population. An important issue is to take stock of the current resources in light of the population, and decide how best to use them.

### **3. Redevelopment Issues**

There has been discussion about redeveloping and restructuring the area of Lawrence Heights. Because the land is of great value, concern was expressed about how the community might be redeveloped. The recreation worker does not want the community to lose out in this process, but that it be a win-win proposition for developers and community members, with the needs of all community members in mind. There is also need for strong community input into the process and design.

It will be important for community members to consider all the issues that are involved in redevelopment, and that there be a proper process to accomplish this. The recreation worker felt that her role is primarily as an information provider, and that the community itself must decide how best to proceed. However, there was some concern that people will embrace the redevelopment without full knowledge of possible consequences.

### **4. Safety**

The recreation worker commented that there is a fear of going out at night in this community. This can be especially true for seniors, who are aware of their own deteriorating abilities to move around as well as potential threats to their safety. At times this fear is fed by a negative media impression of the community. This reinforces people's inclination to stay inside their apartments, fearing the worst if they venture out. In order to enhance safety, there are basic requirements of the environment. For example, walkways need to be well lit and open to visual surveillance.

### **5. Seniors' Housing: Inadequate Design**

It was felt that some of the seniors' housing in the area, as well as being in a poor state of repair, is not appropriate for the needs of elderly residents. For example, the buildings do not have elevators, and have narrow stairways and hallways. They are generally not accessible to people with mobility impairments.

## **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

### **1. Roles**

Promoting the wellness of the community was seen as the community recreation centre's main purpose. Over time, the Centre has moved from providing custodial or "babysitting" programs and services to a more instructional approach. Embedded within their approach has been an emphasis on upgrading the instructional skills of staff, as well as fostering skill development and leadership among young community members.

### **2. Initiatives**

### **Collaborations / Multipurpose Facility**

The Centre also houses a Youth Employment Centre and the Children's Aid Society. This fits in with the philosophy of the Centre that it should be for many purposes, not just one. The fact that three services are under one roof can lead to networking opportunities which benefit the participants. For example, young persons seeking work can be referred to the employment centre, and the outcome of the referral followed. Another example given was the case of a child approaching another child in an inappropriate way. This was handled in a low key manner focusing on counseling and remediation, because the Recreation Centre staff knew the child and family situation, and used its well-developed links with the Children's Aid Society. "When you have a Centre that's as webbed as ours is, you have the ability to respond in a less intrusive manner into the lives of people, and that's what we are talking about . . . it's not just a building."

### **Developing Expertise in Community Residents**

The Centre has worked hard to develop instructional expertise within the community. For the first group of persons hired shortly after the mandate of the organization shifted from custodial to instructional programs, this meant providing the opportunity and expectation that people would upgrade their skills on the job. This was facilitated by pairing community staff with other "expert" staff, and with funding community staff to obtain certification.

The Centre also offers a leadership in training program so that young participants from the community can acquire basic skills. Interested people can then work at the Centre as junior coaches and work on obtaining their certification.

### **Ensuring Access / Reducing Cost Barriers**

The Centre works to reduce cost barriers as much as possible. For example, fitness programs and a weight room are available which are not cost-prohibitive. It is also an important consideration for Centre staff that they do not offer programs to families that they will have to refuse for reasons of cost. To this end, the Centre offers to waive fees for anyone who cannot afford them. They also exert care not to offer prohibitively expensive programs in the first place, which might create barriers to use in the community.

### **Hiring from Within the Community**

An important mechanism which the Centre has used to ensure its ownership by the community is hiring people from within the community to work there. This has been done for both instructional staff and for other staff, such as those involved in security. "I've found that if you work directly with the community, if you hire people from the community but you don't lower your standards, then you're going to make an impact." Hiring within the community also affords community members access to jobs and to training opportunities, which in turn increase their employability in the larger community.

### **Programs Help Reduce Isolation**

An important component of the Recreation Centre's offerings has been to reduce the potential for isolation of all age groups. To do this, they offer programs for mothers and children, seniors, as well as other age groups.

### **Responsiveness to Community**

The Community Recreation Centre prides itself on belonging to the community. A recurrent theme of the interview was the view that the Centre is owned by the community. Part of this is achieved by hiring staff from that community. Some of it is achieved by the attitude of administrators that they are tools for the community. The recreation worker felt that it is important to take quick action when concerns are expressed by the community, so that a sense of trust develops and community members are more likely to come to them with issues. The Centre also prides itself on addressing community needs as quickly as possible through its programs. Part of community responsiveness also involves a commitment to try programs not necessarily initiated by the community, and then ask for feedback and take responsibility for acting on that feedback.

In summary, it appears that a loop of responding to community need and community evaluation of the appropriateness of service, in a climate of mutual trust and with administration who sees their primary roles as facilitative and responsive, are at work to address the needs of the community. It should also be noted that community responsiveness goes beyond program planning to also include issues such as safety and security, which are described in more detail below.

### **Safety Issues: Responsiveness to the Community**

While safety is a community issue, the Centre's response to it illustrates their commitment to responding to the community and working with community members, while maintaining high standards. The particular concern was around issues such as drug use and other undesirable behaviours in or near the Centre. Their approach was multifaceted: to hire a trained security person from the community who knew the community members well; to make signs listing appropriate behaviour; to train staff so that all would give the same message of what was and was not allowed; and to develop a response system that utilized the trained person and did not jeopardize the safety of staff.

This approach --of using a community member with expertise, plus developing a strong idea of the direction desired-- is also successful in other areas such as advocacy and program development. It was felt that this approach has done much to turn around the image that the Centre had at one time of being a place that was poorly used and drug-infected.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Administrative Support**

The Centre, with its focus on development of expertise within the community and lifting financial barriers to participation in programs, could not function in the way it does without support from its administration. The work of the Centre is supported by a supervisor who challenges the Centre to undertake innovative projects to address community issues, and who allows the Centre latitude to pursue its work with a minimum of interference. The Centre is currently administered by the City of North York.

There is some concern as to the possible impact that the Megacity might have on the support now enjoyed.

### **Long Term Commitment of Staff**

The achievements of the Centre are supported by the long term commitment of the staff, and the message that this commitment gives to the community that the staff care and are there because they want to be there. Many of the Centre's staff have been there for more than five years.

### **Trust of Community Members**

The trust of community members supports the work of the Centre and is necessary for people to feel comfortable as owners, users, and change agents of the facility. Fostering this trust requires care and time. It was felt that there can be a natural wariness of bureaucracy among members of the community, given that their previous experiences with bureaucracies may not have been positive. The recreation worker remarked that the administration has spent a great deal of energy being visible and accessible to the community. This includes listening to people and quick response to their concerns.

## **2. Barriers**

### **Financial Barriers**

Although the Centre strives to reduce financial barriers as much as possible, many members of this community have low incomes and might not be able to pay for programs, equipment, or training.

### **Past Experiences with Bureaucracy / Lack of Trust**

As mentioned above, many community members bring with them negative experiences with government bureaucracy. They lack the security of knowing, for example, political figures that they can trust to serve their interests. A lack of trust or a lack of feeling secure can be a barrier to cooperation, participation in programs, and participation in community development.

# **Findings from Elected Representatives**

**Community Quality of Life Interview**  
**Frank Di Giorgio**  
**North York City Councillor, Ward 4**  
**April, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Low Density Area**

Councillor Di Giorgio viewed the fact that Lawrence Heights is a low density area as one of the community's unique and positive features. This "sets it apart from some of the higher density areas which may be similar. And so, the low density I think is a positive because it's one of the attributes of that particular community and the fact that they have quite a bit of green space." "It's very unique, there's a lot of space there. And therefore there's a lot of opportunity to do some creative redevelopment in the future."

**2. Active Recreation Centre and Community Groups**

Councillor Di Giorgio spoke highly of the Lawrence Heights Community Centre, describing it as "active recreation centre." Councillor Di Giorgio has been supportive of many of the centre's activities. "I've tried to be as accessible as possible whenever they needed my involvement or support." For example, he has sponsored special community events and made resources available. Councillor Di Giorgio has also provided support with renovations, swimming pool improvements, and enhanced security. He has also worked closely with a youth group based at the centre.

Mr. Di Giorgio also mentioned other active groups doing very constructive work in Lawrence Heights, such as a seniors group and others that operate out of the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre. When requested to do so, Mr. Di Giorgio has also provided support to these groups.

**3. Good Access to Amenities**

The Lawrence Heights area was considered to be "well served in the sense of all the amenities, the public amenities. They have good public transportation. Over the last number of years we've had a new library built not far away, in the Lawrence and Bathurst area, the Barbara Frum Library, that I think is well utilized by some of the community members and certainly they appreciate the library there. There is good shopping in the area."

Also mentioned was the municipality having recently become more involved in the maintenance of roadways and laneways in the area.

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Geographically Isolated Community**

Councillor Di Giorgio described the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood as seeming like a "fenced-in area." He further explained that: "there seems to be very few egress points into the surrounding communities. Lawrence Avenue, for example, is quite a major arterial road, and it separates that particular area from the residential neighbourhood to the south." With the Allen Expressway, "you

basically have a wall on the east side that separates it from the community to the east. So people in the area have this notion of being fenced in.”

There have been attempts to further enclose the area. “There are a couple of walkways that are scattered throughout the area that allow access into residential neighbourhoods and there have been some attempts over the past number of years by residents to close those walkways off.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

Thus far, none of these walkways have been closed. Councillor Di Giorgio has “been able to ward that off and try and maintain some harmony. We’ve been able to hold those kind of measures off. I don’t believe that they should be closed off, personally.”

Mr. Di Giorgio worked closely with a youth group to address the problem of the closing of the walkways. “They participated in meetings along with some residential people in the area. We were able to get some kind of sharing of concerns and basically consensus that perhaps we should leave them open and just monitor the situation and get some cooperation from people. Like anything else, not everybody was happy. They [youth] were very instrumental in helping me address that issue.”

## **2. Socially Isolated Community**

Coupled with the geographic isolation of the community, there is also a sense of social isolation. As Councillor Di Giorgio says: “There is this notion of isolation, but notwithstanding the isolation, we’ve managed to retain a certain amount of harmonious, interactive relationships, but it’s not anywhere near the kind of interaction that you would like to promote in the longer term. And that’s a major objective I think that has to be addressed in the future.”

One key feature of the community, the Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre, was discussed in relation to this sense of separateness. “It’s used predominantly by the people in that area. Now that’s not to say that that’s a positive.” Mr. Di Giorgio further reflected: “I’m not sure how we’re going to address the problem of a community centre that caters primarily to the Lawrence Heights community. Maybe that’s something we shouldn’t tamper with, we should maybe just improve the recreation centre as much as we can. We’ve got recreation centres scattered throughout all of my areas, so that all of the areas are well serviced. But there doesn’t seem to be that interaction. By the same token, there isn’t an interaction between the northwest area of my ward, let’s say the Ancaster community, which has their own centre, with the Barbara Frum area. So maybe that’s to be expected.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

Councillor Di Giorgio felt these problems are best addressed “over the long term, through a redevelopment of the total site.” He explained that “when you go to redevelop, you try to change both the physical composition of the buildings and perhaps even the occupancy of some of the areas to promote a better blend between the surrounding community and the occupants of the area.” “Orderly redevelopment will be a major responsibility the municipality will have in the future. And again, there are some opportunities there.”

## **3. Relationship Between Lawrence Heights and Surrounding Neighbourhoods**

Connected to the themes of geographic and social isolation is the relationship between Lawrence Heights and the neighbourhoods that surround it. “Most of the interaction that occurs now is of a confrontational nature. Without ever giving it an opportunity to get off on the right foot, things just sort of escalate and get worse. So there’s very little incentive to try and come together and discuss the problems.” Examples of this disharmony include residents of the area around Yorkdale Shopping Centre complaining of youth from Lawrence Heights loitering in the park and around the shopping centre. Mr. Di Giorgio also referred to problems with car and house break-ins in the surrounding neighbourhoods, and how “inevitably all of the accusations point back to the Lawrence Heights area.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

“In terms of healthy interaction between the members of the [Lawrence Heights] community and the surrounding residential community, that’s an ongoing battle and again the only way to minimize that is by having people come together and get to know each other.” Central to this is having key community leaders come to the table. Mr. Di Giorgio was also a member of the Race Relations Committee.

### **4. Lack of Community Cohesiveness**

In order to build good relationships outside of the Lawrence Heights community, Councillor Di Giorgio felt it was important to first build a stronger sense of community within Lawrence Heights itself. He says: “While there are some small groups within the area that are doing good work, there is no cohesive sort of unified community consensus that’s been established within that overall community that would allow them to function as a community. And I think that needs to be done before you can spread out into the larger area.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

Agencies collaborating with key community leaders is seen as one possible way to begin the process of strengthening community cohesiveness. Ideally, one or two people could devote their time to bringing some of the leaders in the community together to meet and discuss common objectives. “I think you need that kind of collective effort to start doing some positive things.”

### **5. Unemployment**

Councillor Di Giorgio highlighted unemployment as a problem, not only in Lawrence Heights, but on a broader scale as well. “I think it’s a general reflection on the recession, that there are very few employment opportunities for the people in the area. And employment is a key ingredient in the healthy life of anybody, let alone the people in that area. So I think people in that area not only are they isolated but they’re also disillusioned and they don’t see a light at the end of the tunnel. And that’s something that all of us in government have to address.”

Speaking about youth unemployment, Councillor Di Giorgio noted that while there are many retail shopping outlets in the Lawrence Heights area, the neighbourhood youth do not seem to be given employment opportunities there.

### **Government and Community Responses**

To address the problem of unemployment, Councillor Di Giorgio sees roles for the individual, community, and government. Again, Councillor Di Giorgio expressed the importance of strengthening community cohesiveness by having the active involvement of key community leaders.

Councillor Di Giorgio was optimistic about future employment opportunities for Lawrence Heights residents. For example, he saw potential opportunities in the redevelopment of the neighbourhood. “We can have a lot of the people who live in the area take an active part in the actual physical reconstruction. Anybody who gets a contract to do work in that area, may be told you’ve got to hire some people in the area, or train some people in the area. There will be some opportunities that provide some employment for people in that area.” Another suggestion was instead of contracting out work, that some of it could be done internally. Mr. Di Giorgio was certain that there were many talented people in the area who could come together and, for example, “offer themselves up as the people who will do the painting.” Of course, support for these types of initiatives is needed -- “something to get it off the ground.” “You’ve got to bend a little bit to give somebody a helping hand, to get them started a little bit.”

“Finding employment is not easily done by anybody these days. Everyone is pushing everyone else to be an entrepreneur. Not everyone has what it takes to be an entrepreneur. So I think government has to somehow come to the understanding that they have to do something about the situation. They have to be able to provide assistance, and in some cases jobs. They are the employer of last resort, as far as I’m concerned.” However, he also indicated that one should “not look to government to always do and provide things for you. You have to actively go out and start creating opportunities. It’s not easily done.”

Councillor Di Giorgio felt that youth could also create opportunities in the community, but that they also need support. “They need help from agencies that provide them with some seed money to get off the ground. They then need a lot of donations to be able to carry on some of the work that they do. Donations from corporations for example. It’s not done easily and it’s not done quickly.”

## **6. Gang Violence and Crime**

Councillor Di Giorgio felt that gang violence was an issue that needed to be addressed. He commented that “gang violence seems to be a periodic kind of activity. It isn’t ongoing activity but it is there for a while and then we manage to chase it away and then it resurfaces. That’s one of the things that we have to look at, how to take some preventive measures to keep these things from coming up, if at all possible to keep them from reoccurring.”

Mr. Di Giorgio felt that “as a rule, crime in general increases during recessionary times, because it’s coupled with the general feeling that with cutbacks, security measures are being reduced, that police protection is being reduced. That all leads to the perception, if not the reality, that crime is going up.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

Again, a cooperative community effort was seen as the approach to take to combat the problem of violence: “. . . through the cooperative efforts of key people in the community meeting in a cooperative way with police to try and work together. It’s the only way to address that.”

### **C. Community Supports and Barriers**

### **Community Supports**

“Good communication linkages between myself and some of the people in the area obviously are important. I do have a linkage with the coordinator at the community recreation centre. Also, the health centre people know that I’m here and we’ve worked well together in the past. So there are some linkages there. That’s what helps. You have to have that.”

### **Barriers to Action**

Councillor Di Giorgio described financial cutbacks as a major barrier to carrying out efforts in the community. Cutbacks make things difficult “not only in the sense that you don’t have the money available, but in that whole context everybody is kind of alarmed and trying to just preserve their own resources and their own lifestyle. They’re not all that interested in doing other things, although those are the things that they should be focusing on. They don’t see it that way.”

**Community Quality of Life Interview**  
**Howard Moscoe**  
**North York Metro Councillor, Wards 4 and 7**  
**May, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Low Rise Buildings**

Mr. Moscoe felt that the low rise buildings of Lawrence Heights were a positive thing. “Unlike most of the Ontario Housing developments in the province, it’s low rise and there’s some space, there’s some breathing space. It didn’t happen because it was planned, it happened because they’re adjacent to a military airport and at that point in time there were very strict height limits on how high they could build. They actually exceeded those limits to a large extent, and over the years they’ve become relaxed as the airport’s use has diminished. But nevertheless, the fact that Lawrence Heights is low rise has been very useful.”

**2. Mix of Housing Types**

Also identified as a positive factor was the mix of housing types in the community. As Mr. Moscoe described: “It contains a very, very great mix in housing types, ranging all the way from seniors to large families.” He also commented on how these housing types are arranged: “I think too, in the organization of housing types, they’ve attempted to group people together in the Ontario Housing buildings, particularly seniors and some ethnic groups. And that’s been a useful thing for people. They feel comfortable when they’re with their own.”

**3. Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre**

The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre was identified as one of the “institutions in the community that are important to large numbers of people. The community health centre has become a very important structure.” Mr. Moscoe noted that the health centre is particularly important in a community with a large number of single mothers, and where many people are unemployed, often due to health problems.

Mr. Moscoe also emphasized that “the health centre has taken a proactive perspective in teaching people, educating people, helping them understand what the components of good health are.” Mr. Moscoe believes that the health centre is extremely beneficial to the Lawrence Heights community and he will continue to support their activities. “I shudder to think what the place would be like if the community health centre and their team were not there.”

**4. Lawrence Heights Community Centre**

The Lawrence Heights Community Centre is another important institution in the community. Many active community members and groups have been affiliated with the centre. Mr. Moscoe felt that the community centre is one of the focal points for teens in the community: “It’s basically given over to teens, teenage activities.” He noted that “there was at one point a real struggle for the ownership of the community centre.”

## **5. Community Stability**

The relative stability of the Lawrence Heights community was seen as one of its positive features. As Councillor Moscoe remarked: “There’s a certain stability. There are residents who have been there for long periods of time. It’s not a community that has a lot of transients, although new people come and go. But compared to most other Ontario Housing communities, I think there’s a certain amount of community stability, and it goes through life cycles, of course.” Later, Mr. Moscoe referred to these life cycle issues again: “What people want most I think is to stay within their own community. . . Lawrence Heights is a community unto itself. People who grew up there know everybody. They want to continue to live there. And so, they have to juggle with the Ontario Housing rules that could put them out of the community.”

Mr. Moscoe felt that this stability benefits the community because “people get to know the community. They know where the problems are. They know each other. And it works a little bit better to have that stability.” He also noted that “there are new ethnic groups coming in, Hispanic groups are a new factor and so on. They need to be addressed too.”

## **6. Lawrence Square**

The opening of the Lawrence Square mall was seen to improve the community by providing people with greater access to stores and services. “A good thing that happened was that Lawrence Square opened and at least provided the opportunity for people to have shopping. Because there was a gap for a period when people were captive of a few small stores in a plaza that over-charged . . . now people have options for shopping.”

## **7. The Community Bus**

Councillor Moscoe was instrumental in getting the community bus for Lawrence Heights. “The community bus is a good thing for Lawrence Heights. It’s worked out really well. And we’ve had to fight every year to try and keep it for as long as we have.” As mentioned above, “there was no store in the area, no supermarket in the area for a period of time. That’s what prompted us to organize the community bus.”

## **8. Core Group of Active Community Members**

Councillor Moscoe recognized the valuable contributions made to the neighbourhood by organizers at the community health centre and the community centre, as well as by area residents. He also pointed out some of the barriers to participation. “You have to understand that most people in Lawrence Heights don’t have time to attend community and ratepayer meetings and those kinds of things. They’re spending most of their time struggling to put a piece of bread on the table. But there’s a core group of people who do attend and are active. Seniors certainly have a lot more time than others to do that kind of thing. But I think people there want to feel they have some say in their life. And so, without putting elaborate structures in place, I think that tradition has to be maintained and people have to be drawn in. And they have to have some real say in their housing, and they have to come to understand how budgets can be spent, and they have to participate in those decisions.”

## **B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Low Income and Unemployment**

“Well, the first problem is when you gather together several thousands of people who have income difficulties, you gather together problems. And it’s like every other social housing project, it’s just by sheer numbers [of people] that you have problems.”

In terms of unemployment, Councillor Moscoe described the problems as “the problems that everyone in Ontario Housing has. You have large numbers of single mothers, large numbers of people who have health problems. That’s why the health centre has become so important. Because there are so many people gathered there who can’t work because they have health problems. But most people in that community are working poor. They are employed. There are very few prospects for their kids, and the jobs tend to be dead end.”

### **2. Geographically Isolated Community**

“The second negative thing is that when that community was built and planned, it was basically walled off from the rest of the community. The streets aren’t contiguous.” Later in the discussion Mr. Moscoe also remarked: “Another problem is that the community is divided in half by an expressway, which is pretty bad planning.”

### **3. Socially Isolated Community (Schools)**

“The schools have been structured in a way that isolates poor people. It’s an enclave. If I were in that community, I would be angry with the fact that the public schools basically bus people in the surrounding community away from that community to prevent them from having to go to Flemingdon Road Public School. People are bused away. Now the excuse was that Cartwright School closed and [they] were busing people elsewhere. But the fact is, the school board has walled off that community as well. It’s a social wall, it’s a school attendance area wall. Now I suppose they can argue, well, we’re providing extra resources to Flemingdon Road Public School and Highland Junior High, to a lesser extent. Because they’re inner city we can provide what people need. And so, half and half, but I think fundamentally they’ve created a ghetto. The physical structure of the community and the school attendance area structure of the community has basically created a ghetto.”

### **4. Deteriorating Housing Conditions**

“The housing stock has begun to deteriorate. It’s tired and it’s old. The Ontario government has put precious little money into rehabilitating the housing stock. Metro itself has North Acres. We had organized to tear down and rebuild North Acres. We were on a high priority list. The seniors themselves had participated in the designing and planning of their own buildings. We were all set to go and then Mike Harris got elected and pulled the plug on it all.”

Mr. Moscoe provided additional description of the North Acres seniors buildings: “North Acres was the first seniors project in Metro that was built by Metro. It’s some thirty years old and it’s obsolete. And it needs to be rebuilt. It doesn’t have elevators to the second floor, it has mostly bachelor units, and it has no security system in the building. Now the seniors who live there love to live there, but they want some decent housing.”

## **Government and Community Responses**

To improve the housing and living conditions, as well as the design of Lawrence Heights, Mr. Moscoe was very involved in the plans to rebuild the North Acres seniors buildings. He described these plans and the reasons why they have not come to fruition. “Because Lawrence Heights is low density, we had the opportunity to use North Acres as a catalyst for redesigning and rebuilding the community in the way that John Sewell had done some work in the Regent Park area. It has enormous potential for doing that. To recreate a community that’s more user friendly. Because the open spaces are not user friendly even though they’re open spaces. But by changing the physical redesign it could have brought people in closer touch with each other. It could have created safer streets and all that kind of stuff, which we were hoping to do. We were hoping to use North Acres as that catalyst. And then Al Leach pulled the plug from under it. And now Metro is being handed over everything, without any adequate resources to repair and bring the place up to snuff.”

Mr. Moscoe emphasized that “we had an ambitious plan for redesigning and restructuring the community, through North Acres as the catalyst and that came to naught and people were justifiably cynical. We also had some plans for the CMHC (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation) lands in front, which we had to battle the neighbourhood to the south. They didn’t want to see non-profit co-ops on those lands. But we had one on the way, it was designed, it was a good project, and it fell through. Because the federal government has sort of been abandoning the housing field as well. But we would have created two non-profit co-ops on the CMHC lands, one the Feisty Seniors Co-op. And we would have restructured that community to face the community centre, create a road in between the community centre and that co-op, which would improve the safety in that area too, and would have created a street scape style thing which unfortunately hasn’t worked out.”

### **5. Relationship with Neighbouring Communities**

Mr. Moscoe briefly mentioned some tension between Lawrence Heights and the neighbourhoods that surround it. For example, people complained about vandalism from Lawrence Manor.

### **Government and Community Response**

“What I’ve tried to do is get dialogue going between those two groups. And we had a good dialogue going at one point . . . and to some extent it’s helped. To another extent, it hasn’t. The vandalism problem has diminished only because the teenage population has diminished a little bit.”

### **6. Drugs**

Drugs were seen as a problem in the community, perhaps less so today than at previous times. “There are drug problems and drug deals and so on. But everybody knows where they are and what’s happening and who’s doing it. But it had become for a while a centre of drug dealing activity.”

### **7. Case of an Unsuccessful Community Initiative**

Mr. Moscoe briefly described a community initiative to establish a food co-op and some of the reasons it was not successful. “There was an attempt to establish a food co-op and that failed. The problem becomes that there were too many people who exploited the situation. Exploited in the sense that there are some people who want to control things and do it their way. Some people were exploiting it for a profit. I know there was a grant given for a truck and somebody bought a truck and it never

really was used for the food co-op and it disappeared and nobody bothered to follow up and check on it. A couple of guys who once were in control of that community and have since been driven out, basically I think were making money on it as well. These folks were the centre of some drug deals and so on, but I don't want to mention any names. Because people in the community are not well educated for the most part, and they're not used to working within corporate structures, they become too easily exploited by anyone who deliberately sets out to do that."

## **C. Community Supports and Barriers**

### **Community Supports**

Mr. Moscoe referred to a number of supports that help to improve the quality of life in the Lawrence Heights community. In particular he mentioned work being done by seniors, activists at the community centre, and the Mormon Church on Ranee Avenue. He also felt that many efforts are supported by "the leadership provided by the community health centre." Neighbourhood aid was mentioned as one community initiative that has worked well.

Additionally, Mr. Moscoe stated that he "has a real fondness for Lawrence Heights, because they supported me right from the beginning . . . I still feel very comfortable in Lawrence Heights and I like the people there. I attend all their functions."

As an elected representative for the Lawrence Heights community, Councillor Moscoe identified two of his key roles as: 1) "to ensure that people who live in that community's interests are represented. And I think that most people would agree that I've done that," and 2) "to have some vision of where I wanted to see that community go, or where people in that community wanted to see it go, and I had to provide some kind of leadership."

### **Barriers to Action**

In terms of barriers, Mr. Moscoe reiterated some of his earlier points: "I've mentioned no money, no institutional support from the federal or provincial government anymore, deteriorating physical infrastructure that badly needs some money. Nobody has any money. You have an Ontario Housing Corporation with no capital budget."

Earlier he had also referred to barriers to participation faced by neighbourhood residents: "You have to understand that most people in Lawrence Heights don't have time to attend community and ratepayer meetings and those kinds of things. They're spending most of their time struggling to put a piece of bread on the table." He also emphasized that community members want to be involved, and should be involved, in the important decisions affecting themselves and their neighbourhood.

Furthermore, Councillor Moscoe remarked that to address many problems you "can't depend on the largess of charity. It has to be government. And anyone who says charity groups will look after things is just whistling in the wind."

**Community Quality of Life Interview**  
**Joseph Cordiano**  
**Member of Provincial Parliament, Riding of Lawrence**  
**June, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Sense of Community**

Mr. Cordiano reported that there are “a number of unique communities” within his riding, for example, there are large Italian and Jewish populations. “When you look at our neighbourhoods, why they work, it is because people have a sense of belonging. That they actually belong to a neighbourhood or they have a sense that they are an integral part of something that’s a little larger than just themselves or their nuclear families. That they belong to church groups, that they belong to institutions, or their lives are integrated with those institutions and that there’s some meaning for them.” He also commented: “What makes a neighbourhood is really the fact that you have a number of people who have a community spirit.” Of the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood, Mr. Cordiano said: “By and large, I think most people feel comfortable in that community” and “they do have a strong sense of community.”

**2. Neighbourhood Institutions**

Mr. Cordiano identified a number of institutions in his riding that strengthened community spirit and improved the quality of life. For some people, religious institutions contribute to quality of life. In the Italian community for example, “there are several parishes in the community that have that kind of community spirit. For the elderly in the community, those parishes act as a source of activity, providing some level of service, not a great deal, not with respect to social services, but providing a sense of community spirit and involvement.” As well, “there are several synagogues in the area.”

Also discussed were some of the public institutions in the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood and some of the services available to community members. “There are other groups that are non-denominational, that have more to do with public institutions, Lawrence Heights Community Centre, others like that. As well, I think the sense of community there [in Lawrence Heights] stems from the fact that there are recreational services being provided, stems from the fact that there are additional services that are available to people, social services, health care services, social assistance type services, youth programs.”

**B. Problems and Issues**

**1. Youth Unemployment**

Mr. Cordiano expressed concern over the lack of opportunities for young people today: “[Youth unemployment] is becoming more of a concern, over the last few years in fact, with the unusually high unemployment rate among young people now in the 90's. It is quite a huge challenge for us.”

**Government and Community Responses**

The problem of youth unemployment requires efforts on a number of levels. “It’s very difficult to point to any one thing that you can do to solve these problems, as a local member. These problems are a result of broad policies that governments undertake. The problem of youth unemployment can’t be solved by a local member saying -- I’m going to create a program for local youth.” Mr. Cordiano commented that “we’re largely ignoring their [youth’s] plight now and I think that the government has a responsibility.”

Mr. Cordiano described some proactive steps that could be undertaken by government such as “an initiative like a youth opportunities act, which would define for young people what government’s role is in their lives.” Mr. Cordiano also suggested that government consider ways in which parents could help students finance post-secondary education. He suggested a plan that allows “parents to save on behalf of their kids education and receive tax credits for it.” He focussed on the importance of post-secondary education being accessible and suggested that , the government of Ontario consider making “first year tuition available to any student that has a B or better average and qualifies to go on to post-secondary education . . . Because that’s a good investment for us in Ontario. We need to be competitive in the future. It’s going to be young people who provide us with that opportunity.”

Access to education was seen as fundamental to improved employment opportunities for youth. Mr. Cordiano expressed concern about how the Conservative government’s policies will affect young people’s opportunities for education. “This is a major concern given the policies of this government, where tuition fees are rising, and student assistance programs have been slashed. Many people in the Lawrence Heights community, young people, will not have the chance to go on to post-secondary education. They couldn’t afford it now. Tuition fees are much higher. And that becomes a huge problem. Obviously we fight the government on that . . . We have to make sure that in the future we give young people the chance to go on to post-secondary education. It’s an absolute must. That’s part and parcel of what we need to do to make healthy communities.”

As the MPP, Mr. Cordiano contributes to increasing opportunities for youth. “One of the things that we’ve always tried to do is to encourage, and I think Yorkdale shopping mall, by and large, it attempts to hire people from the local community. That’s something I’ve always encouraged them to do. Lawrence Square is another mall that opened in the last number of years and certainly that’s helped to give some employment to young people. There’s a Canadian Tire store, there’s a Loblaws, there’s all sorts of retailers there.”

Mr. Cordiano also advocates “looking at our tax laws to provide incentive to companies to hire young people initially” and “an apprenticeship program for young people, where they’re given the chance to work with large corporations. So Lawrence Heights for example, the young people in Lawrence Heights, we could have a plan that works for them, to get them involved in what might be completely foreign to them, areas of corporate sector involvement that they may not have had the opportunity to be involved with. We need initiatives like that. We need more mentoring for those young people. We need entrepreneurial programs. We need to encourage entrepreneurship among the young people in the Lawrence Heights community.”

## **2. Low Income and Unemployment**

In addition to the problem of youth unemployment, Mr. Cordiano discussed the issues of unemployment and underemployment in Lawrence Heights, particularly among older persons and the “working poor.”

“We had a series of people that were downsized, restructured, who were semi-skilled, in our riding, in that particular community. They happened to be a little older, perhaps in their mid to late fifties, had to retire prematurely and perhaps find themselves now in much more difficult financial circumstances than they otherwise would have. So five years have gone by for example, and they may not have saved enough money to actually retire, so they’re finding it hard to get by. There are many, many people living on fixed incomes.”

“There are many of the so-called working poor in Lawrence Heights. Perhaps there is misinformation or a perception that a lot of people don’t work, that live in MTHA [Metro Toronto Housing Authority] buildings. Well, the opposite is true. Most people there have to work. But they’re the working poor and their rents are geared to income. So many people there are underemployed or in fact now may be working two or three part-time jobs. And that is of concern. That causes stress and strain on the family.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

Mr. Cordiano viewed government collaboration with the private sector as key to reducing underemployment. “I just look at the way that this government was supported by people on social assistance who thought that they would get a job. It’s political will that’s required here. And you can bring the private sector in on this. Believe me, there’s a great willingness. It’s ludicrous to think that there’s no role for government. Government can act in that facilitating capacity. And can use some of those tools to provide some bit of incentive. And most of it is just using government’s influence. But you need a leader, you need a premier, you need a government that’s committed to that, to working with the private sector.”

An example of this kind of collaboration which Mr. Cordiano advocates is the Individual Training Account, “where you have a joint management, employer-employee contribution to a training fund and the employee would receive a tax credit for that as well, a deduction like you would in an RRSP plan.” This ongoing training would enable workers to respond to changes in the workplace and “there’s a built-in incentive for employers to keep employees because now you have value added to those employees.”

### **3. Low Income among Seniors**

Mr. Cordiano commented on how seniors seem to be coping: “I think seniors are finding it difficult under this government as well.” He explained that previous governments had ensured that funding was available for seniors programs and initiatives. “I think all of these things are threatened now, even for seniors. They’re coming unglued. The resources aren’t there. Health care is under fire. User fees are a problem for people on fixed incomes . . . there are a heck of a lot of seniors in the Lawrence Heights community that live on fixed income. They’re having a very difficult time with this.”

### **4. Health Care for Seniors**

Speaking of seniors in general, Mr. Cordiano felt that the increasing need to take care of seniors in the community is “a huge problem that we all face and it’s a challenge.” He noted that taking care of

the elderly can be very taxing on family members. Mr. Cordiano discussed the need for community-based care: “It’s a fallacy that we have home-based care, that we have community-based health. It’s not happening quickly enough. And as this government moves to close hospitals, it’s not at the same time moving to fill the need that’s out in the community through community-based care. Additional sufficient resources are not being dedicated for that purpose. Not by this government anyway.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

As with the problem of unemployment, Mr. Cordiano felt that there are also no “easy answers” when it comes to health care. However, he did say that “We can’t just throw public resources at that [problem] and hope that the problem goes away. It won’t. It won’t be that easily solved. But we have to start planning for it in a better fashion than we have. If we talk about home-based care then it’s going to take additional resources.”

### **5. Increasing Polarization between Lawrence Heights and Neighbouring Communities**

Mr. Cordiano described an increasing polarization between residents of the neighbourhoods around Lawrence Heights, where many people are older and retired, and those “in Lawrence Heights who tend to be a younger group of people and tends to be broken down by race. There are differences in terms of values. So what I would say as a challenge to us is to make those two communities more integrated . . . The physical space in Lawrence Heights is acting as a barrier, in my opinion. You can remove the wall and there’s still a barrier. Because the life that people lead outside Lawrence Heights is very different from the one that’s lead inside the Lawrence Heights community, I’m talking about Lawrence Heights and the community centre, the MTHA buildings.”

“That MTHA project is the epicentre of the Lawrence Heights community. That is a very different world from the communities outside Lawrence Heights. And I think this is a systemic problem we face with MTHA . . . It’s part and parcel of that failed endeavour that we saw during the last thirty years to house people in a similar socio-economic situation in housing that is inadequate and that somehow fosters the very antithesis of what we would consider good healthy community living. We can provide services to this community and yet that’s not what we really need to make it function properly. It’s not enough. Now I don’t think it helps that we’re taking away resources, and limiting them. That only exacerbates the problem. What we were doing before essentially was fixing all the symptoms, and not solving the problem. And now we’re not even dealing with the symptoms, and so it’s become exacerbated. And that can only get worse under this set of governments that we have now that are obviously overlooking the needs and the resources that are required to keep good healthy communities alive. So I think for the Lawrence Heights areas, some of the problems we face with that stem from the fact that this is an MTHA housing project, that we’ve seen it fail and fail miserably over the last number of years.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

Mr. Cordiano explained how redevelopment of the Lawrence Heights site would have a positive impact on the community. “I’ve been advocating redevelopment of the area. There’s plenty of land. We could do that in a logical, systematic fashion. No one would have to be put out of house and home to

accomplish this. I have great hopes for the Lawrence Heights community area, because by redeveloping the space physically, I think we could do all sorts of new things.”

“I’m looking at it from the point of view of solving the problem and not just continuing to put band-aids on the problem. And I think solving the problems that we really face there requires redevelopment.”

“I think that the people who live in Lawrence Heights are trying very much to make this a community that works. And I know how much they try and I sympathize and I support their efforts. And I think it’s important for us to give them some support and give them the real tools that they need. We’ve got to stop using band-aids here. You can’t have a community without those basic essentials.”

## **6. Safety**

While Mr. Cordiano felt that most people feel comfortable in the Lawrence Heights community, there are some concerns about crime and safety, such as break-ins and vandalism. “There is a concern about what happens in Lawrence Heights, to be certain, in crime-related matters.”

### **Government and Community Responses**

“As an MPP I’ve worked as much as I could to ensure that we worked with people when there was a concern.”

## **7. Funding Cutbacks to Social Services**

Mr. Cordiano emphasized the negative effect cutbacks are having on the quality of life in Lawrence Heights. “The problems that were there before have become more difficult now. And then you begin to see the seams come apart with some of the lack of funding that we’re seeing, the limited resources. Some of the youth programs we used to have in Lawrence Heights for example, have been affected by the cutbacks.” “Child care is definitely very much a need in the community.”

### **C. Community Supports and Barriers**

#### **Community Supports**

Both individuals and institutions in the community are helpful. As well, the neighbourhood’s strong sense of community can be a support. “I’ve had to, in Lawrence Heights in particular, get to know people rather well, on an individual basis. And there aren’t even that many ratepayer groups in that area. So we’ve had to sort of deal with people and their notional sense of community, rather than the de facto one. And I think the notional one is rather important to people there. When they are called upon, they do have a strong sense of community.” Mr. Cordiano also relies on “the various parishes that give us that kind of point of departure where you can meet with people and understand what they’re doing, what their collective view is.”

#### **Barriers to Action**

As described earlier, the policies of the provincial Conservative government are seen as a barrier to many actions, both in the community and on a larger scale. Mr. Cordiano referred to increasing unemployment, as well as cutbacks to social services, health care, and education, as all having a negative effect on quality of life. “Cutting services and cutting resources is not going to make the problem go

away. It's not going to make it better. It will make it worse. So it's ludicrous to think anything is being done by this government. Nothing is being done. In fact the opposite is true. They are exacerbating the problems."

**Community Quality of Life Written Responses**  
**Mel Lastman**  
**Mayor, City of North York**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

Mayor Lastman listed numerous strengths of the Lawrence Heights community. A major positive factor is the city facilities and access to amenities such as shopping and public transportation. Additionally, there are schools, churches, and the Lawrence Heights Community Centre in the neighbourhood. Other social services are also close by.

Also seen as a strength is that the development is low rise, with lots of open space and parkland. It is viewed as a close knit community with strong community development work being done.

It was felt that the quality of life of community members was enhanced by initiatives such as the area being kept clean, the roads being repaired, and visual improvements to the environment, such as bush cutting, tree trimming, regular trash can emptying, and better lighting. Additionally, the walkways between Lawrence Heights and the surrounding neighbourhoods have not been closed, keeping the links to these neighbourhoods intact.

Mayor Lastman identified numerous successful programs in Lawrence Heights. These included programs specifically for children, such as before and after school programs, a breakfast club, a Helmet Two Wheel Drive program, and a Beavers program for boys and girls through the Onyx Lions and Eureka Lodge. Community gardens have also been successful, as have a Christmas light display contest and a flower garden contest.

Community-based organizations also contribute to the quality of life in Lawrence Heights. These organizations include the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, the North York Community House, and the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance. There is also a resource group of community agencies whereby agencies will consult and cooperate with one another in an effort to reduce possible duplication. Grass roots agencies have access to space in the Lawrence Square mall.

Other initiatives that help to improve the quality of life in the community include Grants in Aid, a Problem Addresses Task Force, and a race relations committee. It was felt that residents receive straight talk and personal service at the office. The new gym floor at the community centre was a significant investment that has helped the community.

**B. Problems and Issues**

Economic frustration, unemployment and low incomes are problems in the Lawrence Heights community. Other issues relate to the physical site, the geographic isolation, the perceived alienation of the community and there being little cross-over with surrounding neighbourhoods. The outlook for youth in the area is seen to be bleak and the media has attached a stigma to the community. After hours clubs and crime are also concerns.

Mayor Lastman sees a need for improvements to the community centre and more housing for seniors.

**C. Community Supports and Barriers**

### **Community Supports**

Mayor Lastman identified two main sources of support for helping to carry out efforts to improve the quality of life in Lawrence Heights: 1) cooperation of all levels of government, and 2) orderly redevelopment of the site.

As Mayor of North York, Mr. Lastman sees himself as accessible to the community, as well as an advocate with other levels of government and a voice for the community as needs arise.

### **Barriers to Action**

Funding issues are a barrier to action. In particular, Mayor Lastman noted budget cutbacks, grant reductions and the costs of provincial downloading as originally announced. Since then, the downloading impact has been offset somewhat by provincial announcements concerning pooling and equalization. But funds are still expected to be tight as cities move to amalgamation. Programs that come from the top down instead of the ground up were also viewed as barriers to action.

**Community Quality of Life Interview**  
**Elsa Chandler**  
**Public School Trustee, North York Ward 4**  
**September, 1997**

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Community Health Centre**

The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre was identified as positive factor in the community. It is important because it provides not only health services, but programs which help people become better parents, and programs to promote health.

**2. Community Recreation Centre**

Ms. Chandler noted that the Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre caters to community members of all ages. It provides many programs that are very good for young people.

**3. Community-Based Organizations and Committees**

Organizations and committees which are run by community members were seen as very important to quality of life. For example, this community has a seniors committee, as well as the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance.

**4. Diversity**

The differing racial backgrounds, religions, and ages of the community members make the Lawrence Heights area an interesting community and a nice one to live in.

**5. Library**

The Barbara Frum Library plays a very important part in the Lawrence Heights community. Not only does it provide services, but it also provides representation to many community committees.

**6. Resource Group**

The Resource Group consists of a number of community agencies and organizations. They meet regularly in order to find out what each other is doing. This is positive for information sharing and planning.

**7. Schools**

Ms. Chandler felt that the school programs in Lawrence Heights are excellent. In particular, the program at Flemington Elementary, which is designated a special needs school, is very good and includes Montessori and English as a Second Language programs. The Bathurst Heights High School has a large component of adult learners. She felt that this sends a good message to younger students who are attending school there, that it is worthwhile to stay in school because otherwise upgrading is needed later.

**B. Problems and Issues**

### **1. Challenges of Working with Committees**

Ms. Chandler noted that at times the Resource Group and other meetings generate a feeling of purposelessness. For action oriented people like herself, such meetings can cause frustration because they are not results-oriented. On a larger scale, it is difficult to maintain a sense that the work of such groups is moving forward.

### **2. Children's Safety**

There is a concern not only in this community but generally in our society that children can no longer play safely outside without supervision. "I think it's very sad that people are so scared to let their children out of the house. Particularly when you live in small quarters and apartments, if your children can't play on the street or the playground without constantly being supervised, it's horrendous."

### **3. Drugs**

Drug use is an issue in Lawrence Heights.

### **4. Family Stability of Lawrence Heights Area Students**

Despite excellent programs at the Flemington Elementary School, it was noted that students from this school often do not arrive at Lawrence Heights Middle School as well prepared as their counterparts from Joyce Public School, the other feeder school. It was felt that a contributing factor may be that the students at Joyce School experience more family stability than the other students, and that this somehow enhances their educational achievements.

### **5. Hopelessness and Lack of Opportunities for Mobility**

Ms. Chandler commented how poverty and lack of opportunity can affect many persons in Lawrence Heights: "I believe that a poor community financially that doesn't see much hope of getting out from that situation can make you feel pretty bad. Unless there is going to be more employment for people, and opportunities provided for getting out of this kind of ghetto, people feel pretty stuck." Ms. Chandler did note that many of the new immigrants manage to leave the community eventually, through personal striving, and a willingness to live very frugally.

### **6. Over Employment**

For people who can find work, low wages or unstable working conditions mean that often people must carry two jobs. Some people work day and night, and do not have time to spend with their families.

### **7. Unemployment**

Unemployment was identified as a major problem. This is particularly serious in Lawrence Heights. Also in Lawrence Heights, youth unemployment is a real concern. Jobs and opportunities for young persons are lacking.

### **8. Violence in the Media**

One potentially harmful influence on children is the content of television and other media to which they have ready access. Concern was expressed about the amount of violence portrayed on television,

and the number of hours children spend watching it. Violent and racist material is also accessible on the Internet.

## **C. Agency Roles and Initiatives**

### **1. Roles**

The Public School Board seeks to improve the quality of life for people in the community by providing a quality education based on the needs of children. They also provide programs for adults and seniors.

Ms. Chandler's job as trustee is a very broad one in that trustee she deals not only with education, but with social problems, families, the police, and the community at large. In her words, "I seem to be doing the job of an ombudsperson." She is called upon to assist for a very wide variety of educational problems from helping children to get into the right courses to assisting families and schools to ensure that special needs of children are met through placement in appropriate programs. She also gets involved in many social problems affecting students, such as crisis situations (missing children), family problems, and investigations around abuse. She also helps people to link to other people and services.

While the Trustee job was not originally envisioned to be so broad, Ms. Chandler felt that it has evolved in this way partly because of her connections to the many components of the community, including local politicians, the police department, Children's Aid and of course the schools. "I think that the job of trustee is a multiple job and very vital." One concern is the impact of the "Megaboard" on this ombudsperson approach to the work of Trustee.

### **2. Initiatives**

#### **Services: Community-Wide**

The spectrum of services offered by the School Board is very diverse. As well as "regular" education for school aged children, there are also programs for gifted students, French immersion, learning disabilities, autism, and developmental challenges. Within elementary schools in the area, many children are immigrants, and English as a Second Language programs are provided. As well, the Board offers programs in a wide variety of venues, based on specific needs of students, for example at the Hugh MacMillan Centre, the hospitals, and home programs for children who are medically fragile. Two secondary schools-- Bathurst Heights and Yorkdale-- are primarily for adult learners. Finally, programs are also available to seniors at venues such as Baycrest, the Betel Centre, and synagogues.

#### **Services: Lawrence Heights**

In Lawrence Heights, Flemington Elementary School offers education for the youngest children. Because it is designated as a special needs school, it has additional staffing. The school includes a Montessori component, special education, and English as a Second Language education. The extra resources at the school are designed to provide additional enrichment to students, and to cater to the needs of immigrant students. Students go on to Lawrence Heights Middle School, and then to Bathurst Heights or Sir Sanford Fleming, which offers a more academic program.

## **D. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Desire to Help**

Ms. Chandler is supported in her work by a strong desire to help people. This comes from her overall view of community needs (she serves on numerous boards of organizations), a recognition of her acceptance in the community and a recognition that others have helped her. Ms. Chandler also firmly believes that people need to help themselves.

### **2. Barriers**

#### **Government Actions**

While Ms. Chandler did not elaborate, she stated that “with all the things we are trying to do, from time to time some other levels of government are trying to undo, and I think that’s very important.”

#### **Lack of New Input in Community Committees**

Many of the people who have been most active in the Lawrence Heights community have been involved in this work, as organizers and members of boards and committees, for many years. However, there does not seem to be a new generation of such persons entering into this vital work. Younger people often work on such initiatives in their capacity as paid staff, but paid staff are often transient because jobs come and go depending on funding availability.

#### **Low Expectations of Student Achievement**

It was felt that one barrier to students’ achievement in education is that generally there are low expectations placed upon them; that as a society, we have not been demanding of students. There is the feeling that as long as young people are provided the opportunities and environment to learn, that they will do so. Ms. Chandler believes that if we are more rigorous and communicate high expectations, we will get the best from young people. Also achievement is often fostered by competition, as long as competitive and non-competitive opportunities to participate in education are balanced. However, pushing children to achieve does not mean eliminating opportunities to play, since playing also affords learning opportunities.

#### **Media Portrayal of Education**

Ms. Chandler commented that the portrayal of the educational system in the media is critical and does not reflect the work being done or the barriers faced by those working within the system. This creates a negative image in the community for public education.

**Community Quality of Life Interview**  
**Pina Losiggio**  
**Separate School Trustee, North York Wards 2 and 4**  
**September, 1997**

**Introduction**

As Separate School Trustee, Ms. Losiggio is responsible for nine elementary schools and three secondary schools in the North York area. Her main role as a trustee is to deal with educational issues and to set policy related to education. Therefore the problems that she deals with are primarily educational and her interview reflects this focus.

**A. Strengths and Positive Factors**

**1. Links with Seniors**

The trustee described the partnership one school has with a seniors residence as a positive factor. The students work with the seniors, visit them, talk to them, and support them. This is seen as a positive interaction of school and community. It was felt that these sorts of community partnerships were the “wave of the future.” As she explained: “We’re living in trying times, changing times, we all have to be able to work with one another, seniors and youth. And what have you, and this is a trend we’re trying as a school system, as an educational body, to build those bridges.”

**2. Staff**

The trustee spoke highly of the staff in the Separate Schools. She noted that the teachers are talented and some have won Prime Minister’s awards.

**3. Students**

Similarly, it was mentioned that the students are very talented as well and several of them have also won awards at the national level. Students are also involved in student government and play an active role in dealing with student behaviour problems which impact on the schools and the larger community.

**B. Problems and Issues / Response of Trustee and Board**

**1. Cutbacks in Continuing Education Programs**

The availability of continuing education for adults is seen as very important to the community. However, there have been a lot of Ministry funding cuts in this area.

**Response:** The Board has been able to maintain most programs, but are concerned that they will not continue to be able to do so. They are exploring other creative strategies to continue funding these programs, such as corporate sponsorship.

**2. Cutbacks in Services**

A serious problem which impacts on schools is the cutbacks in services which are continually increasing. These cutbacks are not just in the area of educational assistants, but also in other areas impacting on the school population such as social workers, community workers, psychiatrists, and services for the hearing impaired. Demands for these services appear to be rising at the same time that funding is being cut.

**Response:** The Separate School Board tries to find money within their yearly budget to put money into these crucial areas. However, finding money for these services means that corners must be cut elsewhere.

### **3. Impact of Cutbacks and Hold backs on Building Conditions**

Recently the government has “held back” portions of the annual budget. The funds held back are often earmarked for maintenance of the schools. Therefore, some students “live” in substandard facilities for a very large portion of their day, facing conditions such as poor ventilation. This is a big concern for parents.

### **4. Lice and Primary School Children**

Lice are a problem in young children, up to Grades 2 and 3, because they play in close proximity to each other.

**Response:** A newsletter is sent to parents every year warning parents to be vigilant regarding lice, and outlining prevention strategies. However, the problem resurfaces every year.

### **5. Lower Per Capita Funding of Separate School Students**

The trustee noted the current discrepancy in funding between the public and separate school boards. For example, per capita spending on a Grade 9 student in the public system is approximately \$2500 more than for a similar student in the Separate system. And yet the expectations of what each student must receive in terms of education are exactly the same. The trustee commented: “In terms of facilities, we absolutely do not compare with the public schools in the system only because of our lack of funding.” The trustee noted that Bill 160 may make the funding more equitable.

**Response:** The Board brings this discrepancy to the attention of officials at the provincial level as often as they can. One of the positive outcomes of the amalgamation of School Boards which has been verbally promised, is that funding per child will be equalized for private and public school children throughout the province.

### **6. Media Image**

It was felt that there is a tendency for the media to focus on problems within the school system, rather than positive occurrences such as students or teachers winning awards.

### **7. Overcrowding in Separate High Schools**

It was mentioned that the majority of Separate high schools are seriously overcrowded. Many of the children spend their school days in portables, which have notoriously poor heating and ventilation. Some do not have appropriate washroom facilities, and students must cross to the main buildings to use facilities there, which is inconvenient in inclement weather. The Trustee receives numerous complaints from parents about this issue.

**Response:** This is an ongoing dilemma as no funding is available to improve the school buildings.

### **8. Smoking Policy**

School policies disallow smoking on or near school property. However, enforcement of this rule means that children must leave the school property to smoke. Students who do not leave the facility face suspension, because there is zero tolerance of smoking in the schools.

**Response:** Some schools have set up smoking areas nearby so that students have a place to go and do not wander from the school. This also avoids the problem of having to suspend smokers.

### **9. Student Littering in the Community**

There was a problem at one particular school with students littering the neighbourhood with food and wrappers from fast food restaurants. There were several complaints from community residents.

**Response:** Student leaders were educated about the problem, and developed a strategy to educate their fellow students. At the beginning, a committee of students went out and picked up litter until the students were educated to do this for themselves as a matter of course. Bins were set up for garbage and recyclable material.

### **10. Traffic Congestion and Speeding**

Problems around speeding and traffic congested were mentioned. This is particularly an issue near the high schools. Residents complain of traffic, speeding, parked cars, and loud music.

**Response:** One response has been to educate parents and students, via newsletters and the student council, for example. It was felt that there were few restrictions that a trustee could enforce. It was seen as more of the role of the local councillor to put in speed limits or speed bumps if necessary.

### **11. Violence in Schools**

Violence is an issue in the schools, as in society as a whole. Media reports seem to indicate that incidents of violence are greater in Scarborough than in North York. Compared to Scarborough, it was felt that the schools in this trustee's wards were still "pretty safe." There are occasional incidences of violence, usually only involving one or two students. Only one serious incident has occurred recently: Students who were not from the high school entered it one day, using baseball bats as weapons. A fight ensued. Apparently the fight was a carry-over from an earlier incident which occurred off the school property. One of the major issues was the students from within the school knew that the outsiders were planning violence, but did not alert school authorities.

**Response:** The Separate Board has a zero tolerance policy regarding violence, which includes six areas and is based on suspensions from 2 to 20 days or expulsion (which is the consequence of carrying a weapon). The definition of “violence” is strict and includes use of profanity or disruption of a teacher as well as more serious offenses such as threats and use of weapons.

In the case of the example above, however, the strategy taken by the Board was a comprehensive, school-wide one. In this case, the police were involved at the outset to meet with involved students, and to remain in the school for about a week (in plain clothes) to ensure that the incident was not repeated. The students were made aware of the need to inform those in authority if they know that such an event is to occur. The police assured informants anonymity, since one of the issues that the students brought out was that they feared reprisals if they informed authorities of the events. The police and students formed a liaison group to work together on the issues. In addition, sections of the school were closed down during the noon hour. Dealing with this incident in such a comprehensive manner was seen as a very good thing: “We automatically within the week called a special meeting, brought the police department in, called the students down, and took drastic actions right away.”

## **C. Supports and Barriers**

### **1. Supports**

#### **Community Organizations**

The schools maintain a relationship with the local Health Unit, which provides public health nurses to do educational sessions with students. Other teachers make use of community field trips and visitors as part of their curriculum.

#### **Corporate Sector**

Working with the corporate sector is a new venture for the separate school system. They have provided computers and equipment for students. One organization has provided some mannequins for CPR training, on the condition that the Board purchase some additional mannequins. Being involved with the corporate sector was seen as logical for schools and beneficial for students: “Maybe we should have always been involved in corporate sector and the business sector, because I think in the end these kids are going to be in these sectors so that line of communication as to what they’re expecting from these graduates and these students should have always been open.”

#### **Police**

It was mentioned that the police have been one of the greatest sources of assistance in the high schools. For example in the incidence of school violence recounted above, police provided education, a confidential reporting mechanism to students, and a presence in the school.

### **2. Barriers**

#### **Barriers to Parent Participation on Councils**

Language is one barrier to parent participation on councils. Particularly in high schools, in which the students and therefore the parents tend to be older, the trustee has noticed that there is some reluctance for parents to become involved in councils (parent committees) because of a lack of English skills. She feels that parents who are not confident in their English skills may be intimidated by sitting on a committee with educators. Thus representation of the interests of diverse groups can potentially be an issue. Parents also experience other barriers to participation, including being busy with the demands of work and home.

### **Communication with Ratepayers**

To communicate with the larger community, the Board maintains a web page, has an information line, and also prepares numerous publications. As well, each individual school distributes a newsletter. However, it can still be a challenge to communicate effectively with ratepayers. Distribution of information may not be timely; or it may be distributed in written form and not read by parents.

### **Student Fears of Retaliation by Other Students**

Student fear of retaliation by other students or gangs if they report activities creates a barrier for a school to be able to manage the threat of violence proactively.