
The People, Places, and Priorities of Lawrence Heights: Conclusions from the Community Quality of Life Project

The Lawrence Heights Community Quality of Life Project

The purpose of the Lawrence Heights Project was to identify the community and neighbourhood factors that enhance the quality of life of Lawrence Heights residents. We also learned about some of the concerns and problems that Lawrence Heights residents face and how they cope with these problems. And we found out about the kinds of resources and services residents would like to see. By having community members tell us about their community and neighbourhoods, we identified strengths that should be protected and issues that need to be addressed. We also heard from service agency workers and from Lawrence Heights's elected representatives. They told us about how they try to address these issues. The project began October 1, 1996 and ended December 31, 1997.

The Lawrence Heights project was part of a larger Community Quality of Life Project that involved learning about another Metropolitan Toronto community, Riverdale. The overall project produced a manual to guide other communities in carrying out quality of life projects. All of this work was a partnership of the Lawrence Heights and South Riverdale Community Health Centres, the North York and City of Toronto Public Health Departments, the Metropolitan Toronto District Health Council, the Canadian Mental Health Association National Office, and the Department of Public Health Sciences and Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto. The Black Creek and Flemington

Community Health Centres provided some advice. We carried out the project with the support of funding from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, a charitable agency based in Jacksonville, Florida.

How We Carried Out the Project

We were interested in looking at the quality of life of youth, adults, and seniors. As the project developed, we were asked to focus on newcomers to Canada. We also were asked to speak with persons with physical disabilities. We wanted also to hear the views of service providers and elected representatives about quality of life in Lawrence Heights. Since we wanted to see the world through the eyes of the people we spoke to, we did not use questionnaires or surveys, but carried out discussions and interviews.

We carried out 18 group discussions involving 146 community members, 12 individual interviews with service providers, and 6 interviews with elected representatives. We also heard from 15 persons with physical disabilities who were interviewed by a service provider. This particular report is drawn from information contained in the larger document: *The People, Places, and Priorities of Lawrence Heights: Findings from the Community Quality of Life Project*. Another document: *The People, Places, and Priorities of Lawrence Heights: Write-Ups of the Group Discussions and Individual Interviews* provides more details about what we heard as we carried out this project. A *Community Report* is also available.

In this kind of project, the emphasis is on in-depth understanding of the views of our participants. We tried hard to hear from as many different kinds of people and organizations as we could. The result of these discussions and interviews is the outlining of a series of “working hypotheses” against which community residents, service providers, and others concerned with the community can examine their own views and experiences. They can then test our findings against these views and experiences, and seek further information if this is necessary.

Findings from the Lawrence Heights Community Quality of Life Project

A number of key findings have emerged from this project. There are clear aspects of the Lawrence Heights community that are valued and prized by community members, service providers, and elected representatives. There are also common issues of concern about life in Lawrence Heights. We have organized these findings in terms of the People of Lawrence Heights, the Places of Lawrence Heights, and the Priorities of Lawrence Heights. This document is devoted to these issues and to pointing towards the future.

The People of Lawrence Heights

The people of Lawrence Heights are very diverse and include many newcomers to Canada. Such diversity has advantages, but is also associated with the presence of community needs. Community members, as well as service providers and elected representatives, told us about these needs. Community members also told us about how they cope and manage. We consider each aspect in turn.

The Diversity of Lawrence Heights

Lawrence Heights is a low-income community. It includes many working poor as well as people who have disabilities and cannot work. Among those who are employed, frequently more than one job is held to make ends meet. There are also many who cannot find work and are on social assistance. Health issues are an important concern.

Many people have lived in the community for long periods of time and this has promoted a sense of community and familiarity with others in the area. Some community members are able to find time to be involved in helping others in the community and work towards solving problems. But many face barriers to community participation such as lack of time and money, and family responsibilities. Seniors, who may have more free time, are especially likely to be involved in community activities and development.

There are many newcomers to Canada who live in Lawrence Heights. These include people from the West Indies, Latin America, Asia and Africa. Such diversity allows residents to find other people who come from similar backgrounds. And indeed, participants frequently spoke about the sense of community solidarity that accrues from being in contact with people with similar backgrounds and situations.

But newcomers to Canada have special needs as they adjust to life in Canada. For many this may involve being able to gain education and employment. Specifically, many newcomers need to learn English, acquire practical employment skills, and become familiar with how the various service systems operate in Canada. Many newcomers come to Canada with education and employment experience, but are unable to apply these in Canada.

In addition to having to deal with these adjustment issues, newcomers have to deal with the presence of discrimination. For those who are members of visible minorities, either newcomers or not, racism is an ever present issue. There are also tensions among different ethnic and cultural groups. When combined with issues of unemployment and low income, this situation creates significant barriers to attaining health and well-being.

The Concerns of Lawrence Heights Residents

Community members have a variety of concerns. Almost every group we spoke to was concerned about the quality of housing, and housing is discussed in the following section. There is concern about the lack of programs for families and children. These include the lack of after-school programs, parent-child drop-ins, and summer activities for children and families. Affordable day care is not available for many. Such a lack of day care is a barrier for women who wish to gain education and employment experience. There is concern about youth and the lack of activities and employment opportunities for them. This is related to a concern about crime and drug use.

For newcomers, there are concerns about gaining education and employment experience. An ongoing issue is being able to access services in their own language: too

few services are available nearby. For newcomers, discrimination is an important concern. Many feel that they are subject to employment discrimination. Some feel that their concerns are not taken seriously by housing authorities and the police because they are newcomers to Canada. Sometimes they are harassed by other community members for speaking, dressing, and acting differently. They do not know where to go for help.

Persons with physical disabilities, many of whom lived outside Lawrence Heights, are very concerned about issues of access. They are frustrated by their inability to enter stores, and to get around their neighbourhood. They wish there were more services and programs for them. These would include educational, vocational, and recreation programs.

Older youth feel that gaining an education is important and at the same time they are concerned about their education. Secondary school students are concerned about lack of facilities and educational opportunities. Many feel that some teachers are uncaring. For some African-Canadian youth, racism is an everyday concern. Some feel that they are subject to discrimination in the workplace and at school. They feel they are constantly harassed by the police. There are some racial tensions in the schools.

Younger children are concerned about crime and safety. They worry about other children and about their families. They wish there were more things for them to do in the community. They want their community to be safer and wish that people would drive slower in the neighbourhood.

Coping and Managing in Lawrence Heights

Considering the many concerns that were raised as part of this project, it is important to consider the means by which Lawrence Heights residents cope and manage. For many people their connection with community-based agencies are an important means by which they cope and manage. In many cases, this involved attending a group that was offered at the agency. For people in general the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre and the

Lawrence Heights Community Recreation Centre are seen as important community resources.

Among the persons with physical disabilities, the support of the North York Community House and other agencies are essential to their well-being. They also depend upon friends and neighbours for help when it is needed. The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre youth group spoke of the group and the Centre as an important place for dealing with day-to-day-issues. All three seniors groups, organized by either the Community Health Centre or the Community Recreation Centre, spoke of the importance of the activity groups, and the respective centre which organized it, for their well-being.

Among some of the adult groups there were similar feelings. The community health centre's Spanish-speaking women's group and the parent-child drop in group, and the settlement agency's Tamil and Eastern European groups spoke highly of the agencies and the support they provide. For newcomers such as the Tamil groups, these agencies provide means by which they acquire required skills as well as social contacts.

The availability of these agency supports was known to other groups. For example, among Lawrence Heights residents such as the grade 8 girls and boys, and the secondary school African-Canadian group, the community health centre was seen as a potential source of support. But the primary means of coping when problems arose for these and the other students involved parents, friends, some teachers, and personal coping mechanisms.

Among the Somali groups, it was felt that there were few if any community supports available. While the community health centre was a place to go for medical assistance, it was not currently seen as a support for other issues. And importantly, the secondary school African-Canadian group, felt that there was nowhere in the community to go to for support in relation to issues of police harassment and racial discrimination. Elected representatives were not mentioned as being a source of assistance by community members.

The Places of Lawrence Heights

Lawrence Heights constitutes a distinctive geographic community that consists of government operated housing. There was much discussion about the physical aspects of this living environment. Access to amenities, the ability to get things when needed, was another important aspect of living in Lawrence Heights. Finally, the community agencies and services of Lawrence Heights are important. These agencies work hard to help Lawrence Heights residents.

The Physical and Housing Environments of Lawrence Heights

Lawrence Heights consists of low-rise housing with ample open green spaces. There was common agreement among community members, service providers, and elected representatives that this made for a physically attractive community. Within the area there is seniors housing as well as low-rise apartment houses and some townhouses. Lawrence Heights also constitutes a distinct physical entity that is isolated from the surrounding community. For some community members, this isolation facilitates the development of community.

For the elected politicians, it is seen as having led to geographical and social isolation from the surrounding community and is seen as a liability and issue to be addressed. All four elected representatives spoke of the need for redevelopment of the site. The neighbourhood isolation issue is encapsulated by the use of the term “Jungle” for the community. For many it serves as a pejorative term used by the surrounding community to refer to Lawrence Heights. For some community members, it is seen as their pet name for the community. Some service providers and residents saw it as an illustration of negative racial attitudes towards the community.

There was universal agreement among community members that the maintenance of the housing stock and physical area is poor. Garbage is common and has led to the presence of vermin. For many seniors, housing size is inadequate and waiting lists for

those with large families are long. Community members see the deterioration in maintenance as resulting from cutbacks to funding and the reduction of service staff. Some maintenance work is underway, but the perception of poor housing is shared by many service providers as well.

Outside Lawrence Heights proper, housing is also an issue. Affordable housing is seen as being in need of repair and adequate housing as being out of reach. Within Lawrence Heights, there is concern about possible privatization of the housing stock; outside Lawrence Heights there is concern about the ending of rent controls.

Accessing Amenities in Lawrence Heights

Having access to amenities is an important aspect of life in Lawrence Heights. The opening of nearby Lawrence Square has provided residents with choices concerning food and other necessities. The nearby subway allows people to get to where they need to go. There are other shopping malls within a short distance. The presence of the Community Health Centre and the Community Recreation Centre within the neighbourhood provides health care, community development, and recreation opportunities. There are also nearby schools and libraries.

Nevertheless, there are no commercial businesses, even a variety store, within the community itself. And some community members raised concern about the lack of choice concerning the stores that were nearby. Similarly, there is a general belief that weekend bus service is poor and the lack of a local bus after 7:00 pm is a real sore point among community members. Residents commented that they are unable to have deliveries made to the community after dark by commercial outlets who avoid the community because of crime fears.

The Community Services of Lawrence Heights

The local community agencies work hard to assist community residents. The Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre offers community programs for four main groups:

seniors, youth, families, and women. In addition to running programs on its own, the centre is working closely with other organizations to maximize their impact. In addition to the Community Recreation Centre, these groups and agencies also include the Lawrence Heights Area Alliance (a resident-run community development agency), Jamaican-Canadian Association, YMCA, Children's Aid Society, and Black Cap, a community-based agency focusing on youth and HIV. There is also emphasis upon meeting the needs of newcomers to Canada. This involves both hiring community members as well as forming alliances with other organizations such as Midaynya and the Somaliland Women's Organization, among others.

The North York Community House offers a range of programs including advocating for persons with disabilities, supporting tenants on housing issues, working with the Tamil community, providing multilingual services and language classes, among others. Like the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre, there is an emphasis upon forming alliances and networking with other agencies.

The local school boards also work closely with community agencies to support children and their families. Education staff work hard to provide children with positive learning experiences and to be culturally sensitive. Educational officials and teachers develop their own programs and work closely with community agencies to develop programs that support families and children.

All of these agencies know that they cannot meet all the needs that exist within the community. They suffer from a lack of resources and are concerned about further cuts to funding. They are forced to establish priorities and must identify those in greater need as they develop and implement programs. Potentially, support could be received from the private sector to carry out some of these activities.

Service workers and teachers feel supported by their agencies and fellow staff, other agencies, and by community members. The barriers to carrying out their work include cutbacks, limited funding and resources, as well as language barriers, lack of volunteers, and difficulty in reaching community members about the services that are available.

The Priorities of Lawrence Heights

Lawrence Heights, like many communities in North America, has its share of problems. Some of the issues related to housing and community concerns have been previously mentioned. This section focuses on three main priority issues of employment and income, service needs, and the future of the community in specific relation to potential redevelopment.

The Employment and Income Issues of Lawrence Heights

Many of the residents of Lawrence Heights are either the working poor or on fixed incomes such as persons with disabilities or seniors. Those that are working sometimes have to hold down more than one job. These create tensions within families. Those on fixed incomes are at the mercy of rental increases and cuts to social assistance rates. User fees are seen as especially onerous for people on low incomes, and some community members commented that having to apply for subsidies for services was degrading.

Many community residents are unable to find work. This is especially the case among youth. In addition, the recent provincial cuts to social assistance rates have created even more hardship for poor people. Service agencies must struggle to help people to simply get by from day-to-day.

Community agencies attempt to help people find work. In some instances they advocate for changes to social policies and programs. They provide support to groups on housing issues. They also develop programs that are sensitive to the pressures under which community members must live. Support for young parents is provided through the development of drop-ins. Community kitchens assist residents in preparing low-cost food. Agencies try to assure that costs does not deter potential clients from using their services.

They try to use methods that will empower individuals and help build the community. But service providers feel that things are getting worse and they can only do so much.

When these needs are combined with ongoing cuts to resources, service providers feel frustrated and worn-out.

Local schools establish special programs to assist students in need. They work with other agencies to support children at risk in the community. They try to provide a positive learning experience for children who may be at risk. They work in close collaboration with other agencies to support families and children. They also see the effects of low income and income cutbacks upon children and their learning.

The elected representatives speak out about the effects of cuts to services and social assistance rates. Provincial policies are seen as hurting the most vulnerable in the community. Representatives try to be responsive to the needs of these vulnerable individuals. They try to remain in touch with community members.

The Service Needs of Lawrence Heights

There are clearly a wide range of service needs within the community. Programs are needed to support families and communities. Newcomers to Canada are remarkably perceptive as to their needs for education and employment experience.

Needs for education and employment training are common to all Canadians. They are especially important for those whose language and culture may be different than those who have been in Canada for a while. Resources are required to provide English as a Second Language classes, and training in employment skills. But agencies that are charged with providing these services are themselves being cut back and having their budgets reduced. Many needs of newcomers go unmet.

Service providers concur in believing that services are needed within the community. The results of their needs analyses have identified supports needed by newcomers to Canada, youth, and seniors. Unfortunately, lack of resources does not allow them to address these needs. Requests for funding are often submitted and only sometimes funded. Assistance is being requested from private sources. Collaborations and alliances

are being formed to address identified needs. In the meantime, residents cope as best they can.

The Future of Lawrence Heights

Among community residents there is concern about the effects of future cuts to services. All the adult and seniors groups spoke of the deterioration in maintenance and repair of the housing stock. Some groups spoke of the general concern with further cuts to community services. Many residents have seen their unemployment and social assistance benefits cut. All of these occurrences are a threat to the future of Lawrence Heights and to the people who live there.

All four elected representatives spoke of potential redevelopment of the Lawrence Heights site. Whether such redevelopment is possible, considering the downloading of social housing costs to the local municipalities, is unclear. It is also uncertain what the effects of such redevelopment would be on Lawrence Heights residents.

Whether redevelopment takes place or not, the housing is in need of repair and improved maintenance. Whether such improvements are possible in light of these ongoing funding reductions and cut-backs is unclear. Will the needed services be provided? If not, what will be the effects on Lawrence Heights and the people who live and work there?

Summary

Residents, service providers, and elected representatives are doing all they can to improve the quality of life in Lawrence Heights with the resources they have. While some things can be done at the individual and community levels, the employment and income issues and the need for services that have been identified in this report need to be addressed at the policy level. These issues should be brought to the attention of those responsible for formulating social policy.

Towards the Future

Being involved in the process of building community is something that people in this community hold very dearly. - Service Provider

In this section we present some possible directions for action suggested by this report. We do not make recommendations, but draw attention to some issues. This presentation is organized within the framework of the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*, the World Health Organization document that, since 1986, has influenced the direction of health promotion activities around the world. There are three main sections in this chapter: the conditions necessary for health; the elements of health promotion; and health promotion actions.

The Conditions Necessary for Health

According to the Charter, the necessary conditions and resources for health are peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources, social justice and equity. Clearly, there are people in Lawrence Heights for whom many of these basic conditions are not being met. For some, there are immediate needs for decent housing, and greater income through employment opportunities or life-enhancing levels of social assistance. And while peace may not be a current issue, there are issues of personal security related to crime and vandalism.

For many newcomers to Canada, issues of education are essential to their adjustment to life in Canada and to personal well-being. Yet many newcomers are not able to take advantage of English as a Second Language classes or get employment experiences.

Many of the changes associated with economic globalization are increasing the distance in income levels among Canadians in general and Lawrence Heights residents in particular. If the literature from other jurisdictions is any guide, such differences lead to

less community cohesion and increases in community and personal problems. Clearly, these are issues not only of social justice and equity, but also of maintaining the quality of life in Lawrence Heights. Means of reducing economic inequality include progressive taxation policies, maintaining quality services and economic supports for those who require it, and fostering economic development.

The Elements of Health Promotion

According to the *Ottawa Charter* there are three elements at the heart of health promotion. These are 1) advocating for health; 2) enabling people to work towards health; and 3) mediating among the range of societal institutions and local groups to support health.

Advocacy

Advocacy involves recognizing and working towards the conditions necessary for health. It frequently involves speaking out about the effects of government actions and policies on communities and individuals. While some agencies in Lawrence Heights have already been speaking out, these actions may become even more necessary in the future.

Enabling

Enabling involves providing individuals with the means and opportunities to reach their fullest health potential. This involves providing security within a supportive environment, and access to information, life skills and opportunities for making healthy choices. People can only achieve health when they can control those things which determine their health. Much of the community work in Lawrence Heights appears congruent with these principles. But the community work that is occurring is threatened by funding cuts and policy changes. There are also many identified needs that are not being met. And many people in Lawrence Heights are either unaware of many of the available resources and services, or are unable to access them.

Mediating Among Institutions and Groups

The foundations for health cannot be provided by health workers alone. Health promotion requires coordinated action by governments, health and other social and economic sectors, nongovernmental and voluntary organizations, local authorities, industry, and the media. People in all walks of life should be involved, and the task is to bring these sectors together even though competing interests may exist. Again, Lawrence Heights is carrying out creative partnerships among diverse sectors. These efforts need to be extended.

Health Promotion Actions

The Charter outlines five key health promotion actions. These are 1) building healthy public policy; 2) creating supportive environments; 3) strengthening community action; 4) developing personal skills; and 5) reorienting health services.

Building Healthy Public Policy

Promoting health means more than providing health care. It makes the health of communities and individuals part of the work of policy makers in all sectors. It points out to them the health effects of their work, and makes them responsible for the effects of their actions. These policies include fiscal measures, taxation and organizational change. The outcomes of these actions should be safer and healthier goods and services, healthier public services, and cleaner, more enjoyable environments. To date, Lawrence Heights residents have had some access to policy makers at the municipal level. Access to policy makers at all levels needs to be improved.

Creating Supportive Environments

Health of communities and community members are closely linked to environments. One guiding principle is to have communities where people take care of each other, their communities and the natural environment. Changing patterns of life, work and leisure effect health. Work and leisure should be a source of health for people, but for many people in Lawrence Heights there is either no work or part-time work, and few resources for leisure. Work towards providing living and working conditions that are safe, stimulating, satisfying and enjoyable should continue.

Strengthening Community Action

Health promotion involves concrete and effective community action to achieve better health. Key to this is fostering community ownership and control of their activities and futures. Community activities should draw on existing human and material resources to enhance self-help and social support, and to promote public involvement. One outcome of this project may be a process of engaging community members to consider and address the findings in this report.

Developing Personal Skills

Health promotion supports personal and social development with information and education for health and enhancing life skills. It allows people to exercise more control over their own health and their environments, and to make choices conducive to health. These skills can be facilitated in school, home, work and community settings. The involvement of educational, professional, commercial and voluntary bodies is necessary. Dissemination of the findings of the Lawrence Heights Community Quality of Life Project and the involvement of community members to respond to its challenges can contribute to this goal.

Reorienting Health Services

Bringing health promotion principles to health services is a responsibility of individuals, community groups, health professionals, health service institutions and governments. Health services should be sensitive to and in respect of cultural needs. They should be aware of and supportive of the needs of individuals and communities. Dissemination of the findings of this project to workers in nearby hospitals, seniors' residences, primary care physicians and nurses, and social service agencies can contribute to quality health care services for residents of Lawrence Heights.

Conclusion

In summary, the Lawrence Heights Community Quality of Life Project has allowed us the opportunity to learn about and from the community. The immediate outcome of this project has been this report which has documented the strengths, issues, and activities of the people who reside, provide services, and represent the people of Lawrence Heights. We urge that as much of the community as possible consider its findings and its implications for Lawrence Heights. It is imperative that these findings lead to thoughtful and effective action.