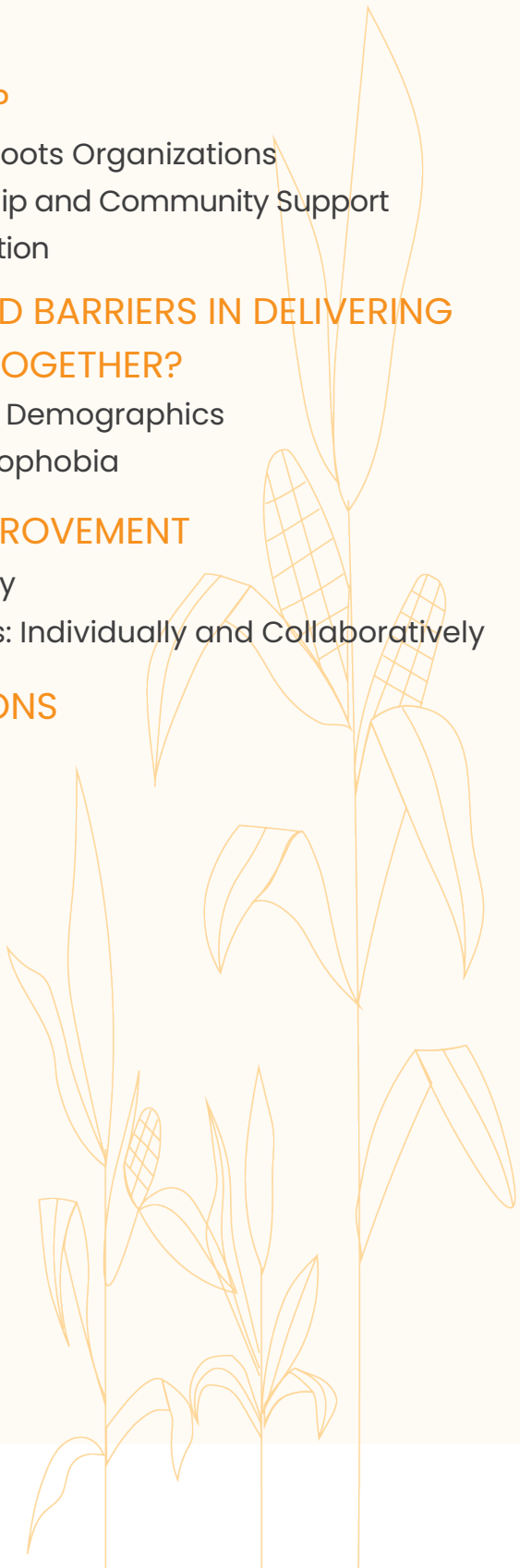
ENGAGE RURAL

North Dumfries • Wellesley • Wilmot • Woolwich

Grassroots Organizations and Key Informants Interviews from Racialized Groups

Key Findings

Table of Contents



METHODOLOGY

As part of the Rural Upstream Project, our Community Engagement Team has reached out to over 60 grassroots groups, organizations, and individuals in the Waterloo region. We used various outreach methods such as email, phone calls, personal connections, and LinkedIn to contact these groups. Our goal is to better understand how rural agencies and equity-seeking organizations can collaborate more effectively to meet the needs of the community in rural townships.

We asked a set of standard questions to all grassroots community groups and organizations, to gain a deeper understanding of how we can work better together in delivering health and social services in rural townships. The information we gathered will help inform and guide the collective vision for our Rural Strategy and Action Plan in Phase Two of the Rural Upstream project.

Questions

1. Tell me about the services you offer, and do you have people coming from the townships?
2. How do we create spaces and services in our community that welcome people from your community?
3. How do we honour diverse identities in health, social and mental health spaces?
4. How can we ensure that health and social service providers better support the needs of your community?
5. How can we find ways to connect and support each other?

We conducted interviews with 15 grassroots equity-seeking groups, organizations, and key informants, and this report contains the main findings from those interviews. These equity-seeking groups represent people from different ethnic, cultural, sexual orientations, and abilities.

METHODOLOGY

We used an intentional approach to reach and engage the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit voices, based on recommendations from Wellbeing Waterloo consultations with the Indigenous community in 2018. The key recommendations were that Indigenous people are tired of being subjects of research and consultation without seeing tangible results and progress specific to Indigenous communities. Mainstream organizations tend to talk to only one or two groups, which do not represent the many Indigenous communities in the region. There is not one organization that represents all the Indigenous communities and there is no accountability back to the community. Engage Rural has the privilege of sitting on a Municipal engagement process with members of the newly formed First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Advisory and Advocacy Circle. We were able to connect with members of the Circle and provide a brief overview of the Rural Upstream project. At the meeting, we were advised not to create another table and to work with them through the newly formed Circle. The Circle is still in the process of establishment, and we will continue to reach out and engage this circle as we move into phase two of the project.

1. WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

a. Engage the Leaders of Grassroots Organizations

Various groups and grassroots organizations expressed their appreciation for rural agencies' efforts to establish meaningful connections with all the populations living in the townships. It is crucial to recognize the significance of people's experiences when accessing health and social services.

> "Thank you for doing it because it needs to be done."

There was a general agreement that the services should be more reflective of the community they serve. It was expressed that just by engaging the different groups and asking these questions people feel that the agencies are making the community more inclusive and welcoming for all. It is the process of engagement itself and should continue, but there was a warning that this should not just be a superficial effort. People hope to see collective action from the Rural Strategy.

In speaking with grassroots groups, they are also trying to reach and connect with their ethnic and cultural groups and equity-seeking groups in the townships. As rural organizations, it is essential to build relationships with these groups to support each other's efforts in reaching the rural population. This is a key approach to reaching diverse rural populations and building our collective understanding of the rural demographics.

To spread awareness of services in townships, engaging with grassroots leaders, collaborating and building respectful relationships can help build trust and reach diverse populations. They have offered to support our efforts by promoting events, encouraging service usage, and inviting new people to participate. Building connections can lead to new ideas and approaches to reach specific populations.

1. WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

b. Emerging Grassroots Leadership and Community Support

In the townships, local citizens have taken the lead in making positive changes and educating the community about diversity. They have organized community-led events such as PRIDE, held community conversations, and hosted the inaugural Multicultural Festival in Elmira to celebrate our differences. These events received overwhelming community support, which motivated the organizers to look for new ways to build a stronger sense of community. The community's active involvement was a great source of inspiration for the organizers, and they are committed to doing more to promote diversity in the townships.

> "The smaller towns do amazing jobs. So, it's there, they just need the financial support to keep it (events and initiatives) going."

c. The Importance of Representation

We are seeing true diversity in the township as more people move into the townships.

It was expressed by several cultural and ethnic groups that having more representation in health and social services will go a long way in breaking down some of the stigma in accessing those services and provide a more holistic approach to the care people receive. Western approaches may not work for all people, and some felt that white professionals may bring cultural stereotypes and microaggressions to their practice.

> "Not everything I experience is about racism."

Newcomers and cultural groups discussed how having someone who speaks the same language and is from the same or similar cultural group goes a long way in building trust and relationships. This helps to create spaces and services that make people feel welcome and heard.

2. WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND BARRIERS IN DELIVERING SERVICES AND WORKING TOGETHER?

a) Understanding the Changing Demographics

The townships' demographics are changing, but we lack a good understanding of who is residing in the community. This data void is felt throughout the region. When discussing this limitation, the is a desire for a regional approach to address.

> "The real issue is we just don't know who is living in the townships. We don't know who is there and what their needs are."

During discussions with a regional agency that serves new immigrants, it was mentioned that they face challenges in connecting with this population in rural areas. They confirmed that many ethnic and cultural groups prefer seeking support in urban areas, and it is unclear how to reach out to those who live in townships.

> "We know there is diversity in the townships, but we are all struggling to reach them."

In speaking with the various groups, it became apparent that many people from equity-seeking groups feel isolated in the townships, especially when living in a rural area. Despite rural communities being known to be welcoming and close-knit nature, this is not always the case for minority groups and people of colour. Although there are more diverse populations moving into the townships, many of them feel unwelcome. This lack of inclusion results in people moving away from the area. Some BIPOC populations spoke about feeling that there is no one to connect with in the township and that there is a lack of culturally inviting activities. In Cambridge and North Dumfries, people of colour are more likely to seek services in the city as the barriers are too high in the township.

2. WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND BARRIERS IN DELIVERING SERVICES AND WORKING TOGETHER?

b. Addressing Racism and Homophobia

> "Racism. It requires real action, not a political response alone."[1]

During our conversations with different equity-seeking groups, we heard about the prevalence of racism and homophobia in the townships. Many individuals shared their experiences of being targeted by hate-motivated behaviours. We heard stories of how people try to blend in and avoid standing out in the community to be more accepted. Racism in the townships has been described as "quiet racism" because it can be subtle and includes microaggressions. Some groups keep their identities hidden and choose not to self-identify for fear of not being accepted.

> "The amount of racism here in the townships is no different to how it was when they were growing up."

The purpose of this section of the report is not to document personal experiences but to present ideas about how we can collectively bring about change. Our rural communities are constantly evolving, which calls for a united approach to address the issues and create an inclusive community where everyone feels like they belong. However, there are often polarizing tensions between new arrivals to the community and long-term residents. As rural communities continue to grow and undergo changes, some people may resist the change, which can affect their perception of people moving into the township.

> "We were blatantly pushed out of the community."

[1] https://www.engagewr.ca/anti-racism

2. WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND BARRIERS IN DELIVERING SERVICES AND WORKING TOGETHER?

There have been several instances of racism and homophobia in the townships, leading to a feeling of a divided community. Some equity-seeking groups have expressed that they feel the community is not doing enough to publicly counteract these instances. It is often observed that the community is quick to rally around the perpetrator and justify their actions or comments. Due to such encounters, many members of equity-seeking groups often leave the township. There was a strong message for the community to come together and take the lead in addressing these injustices.

> "It needs to be people who see the injustice, not just because it's an individual, but because it's anyone in their community."

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT
ADDRESSING WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

a. Equity Work – As a Community

Leadership to Stand up Against Discrimination

There are concerns among certain individuals regarding the lack of leadership in addressing issues related to racism and homophobia. To foster a sense of inclusivity and community, it is vital that we collectively address these issues. Many groups have stressed the significance of a collective and systemic approach to tackling inequality, which involves education, community-building, and leadership. It has been proposed that we move beyond mere apologies and take concrete actions to address the root cause of these problems. This is a call for a united effort and strong leadership to confront these issues.

Building Cultural Awareness and Recognition

Canada is a country that embraces people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, it has been suggested that we need to be more conscious of our Western values and worldviews while designing our programs and services. This awareness will help us understand how our actions and policies are perceived by individuals from other ethnic and cultural groups.

> "We need to prepare the community to adapt to a more diverse Canada. The more knowledge we have, the better citizens we can be and a contributing community member."

We should focus on developing the skills and capacities of the community to enable them to actively participate in Canadian life. This requires intentionally building the community by fostering cultural competency and understanding different worldviews and values. Many groups emphasize the importance of education and building trusting relationships with each other to achieve this understanding. By doing so, we can gain insights into different perspectives, challenges, and barriers faced by people. Together, we can learn from each other about the required support and services in the townships and who is best suited to provide them. Community education and advocacy play a critical role in raising awareness about hate and discrimination in the community.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT
ADDRESSING WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

Inclusive Multipurpose Space

It can be quite challenging to find the ideal location or space in rural areas. The space used to host any program or service must be appealing and comfortable for the people being served. The Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan of the Region has also recognized the importance of creating new culturally safe and accessible spaces within the community and supporting the existing institutions.

> "We need an approachable place – a hub-like space that's not just geared towards one service."

Most of the people interviewed identified the need in the rural townships to have space(s) to gather and be part of the community. It was emphasized that when looking at social support – we need to understand some of the historical barriers some groups face when hosting events in places like churches, government buildings etc. How do we build alliances and partnerships with the various groups if our meeting places or spaces are barriers themselves?

> "Could there be a physical presence in each community where people don't feel vulnerable to attend?"

When discussing space, certain groups have highlighted the effectiveness of programs and services that are implemented in collaboration with health service providers. Providing these programs and services in multipurpose spaces helps to eliminate some barriers to access and fosters trust in the utilization of these services.

Multiple agencies and groups are currently working independently to develop communal spaces. We must work together to avoid duplication of efforts and to maximize investments in our townships. Some groups are conversing with politicians to revitalize empty buildings, while others are initiating capital projects, and some are considering constructing industrial community kitchens. This presents a potential opportunity for us to work together to establish a community hub-like structure.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT
ADDRESSING WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

Health and Social Service for Rural Equity-seeking Groups

Generally, people prefer to have healthcare and social services available in their local areas. However, when it comes to delivering services in rural townships, it's important to understand that we are adjacent to urban communities. People in rural areas realize that they need transportation to access many services, regardless of their location. Therefore, we need to work with the community to evaluate which services are considered essential in the townships, which ones should be provided on a needs basis, and which services people are willing to travel outside the townships for.

Alliance with Grassroots Organizations

As many equity-seeking grassroots groups are growing in the region, they are often volunteer-run and serve a large geography. While we have learned they are a key access point to reaching diverse populations in the townships they may lack the capacity to support the rural townships. Some speak to the need for funding and capacity to bring support and services to the townships.

> "Local is nice, but I think that's unrealistic given my demographic."

As rural agencies, we know this challenge of delivering services to small populations. There is an opportunity to share some of our learnings and build on our social capital to help with collaborative approaches to co-design programs and build stronger relationships between our agencies and these groups and organizations.

It was noted that attending events in the cities that are targeted at various equity-seeking groups is a good strategy to reach these populations as rural people are more likely to attend and make connections with rural organizations there. This has been successful in Cambridge, reaching people from North Dumfries.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT
ADDRESSING WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

b. Equity Work – In our Agencies: Individually and Collaboratively

Creating Inclusive Environments

Discrimination at the structural, cultural, and individual levels can have negative impacts on both the community and the workplace. After speaking with various equity-seeking groups, it became clear that having representation within the workforce and sector is crucial. This means having people who understand and welcome different worldviews and values, creating an environment where individuals feel accepted and included. We must evaluate the influence of the dominant Western culture and strive to be more inclusive in our practices.

Rural agencies have difficulties in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce, which adds to the challenge of building more representation across the sector. Agencies must prioritize equity work, eliminate disparities, and build a culturally competent workforce. This is essential to create an equitable culture for both the community and the people who work there.

Addressing Barriers to Participation through an Equity Lens

It's essential to acknowledge that traditional rural barriers can be intensified by structural barriers ethnic and minority groups experience such as policies and social norms. This can lead to greater challenges in areas such as isolation, poverty, homelessness, unstable housing, unemployment, and limited access to education. Therefore, we must comprehend how we can provide better access to support and services through an equitable lens that considers the intersectionality of rural and equity-seeking groups. Rural agencies have the proven ability to pivot operations and approaches to address barriers to better meet the community needs.

Investment in Services and Supports for All in Our Rural Townships

As part of our vibrant Waterloo region, the rural townships must have equitable access the health and social services to meet the growing needs of the community. It has been identified that culturally specific resources are necessary.

Some of our rural communities were described as 'cities in the country' with commercial shops but there are no services available. As a result, people won't stay and seek the services they need in the city – putting more demand on those services.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT
ADDRESSING WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

It was suggested that all levels of government need to improve the level of investments in rural support and services. This includes building community assets and ensuring people have access to the support and services they need. By working together and educating everyone about the advantages of offering services in rural areas, we can enhance access to essential services for everyone.

> "I think we just have to continue to advocate for it (services) and push to keep bringing this issue to light."

Recognizing the value of Collaboration and Equitable Partnerships

During the interviews conducted in the region, a common thread emerged regarding the need for better relationships and communication between grassroots equity-seeking groups and rural agencies. Many of these groups expressed a lack of familiarity with the roles of rural agencies and how to contact them. They also felt they lacked an understanding of the rural landscape.

> "We need a convening table."

We need to establish a system-level mechanism that encourages relationships and collaboration to accomplish our shared goals. During the discussion, one group mentioned that receiving support in rural areas is often dependent on personal connections. If you don't know the right person, it can be tough to identify who to reach out to for help, which reveals the lack of a system-wide mechanism to connect with rural organizations. Therefore, it's essential to create a mechanism that helps us connect and collaborate effectively.

> "We need to do a better job linking people to the support they need."

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT
ADDRESSING WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

This reflection says it well:

> "
>
> For change to happen, someone has to say that it's something that needs to be changed. Someone needs to point out that something is not working. You also need somebody to point out why it's not working so we know what is not working and why it's not working and then you need one or more people to have enough creativity to come up with ideas to fix it.
>
> Maybe there are not enough people who are actively impacted to create it, or for some reason, they cannot be creative because they do not have the time or the resources to think of a different way of being. They don't know, they don't have the ideas, the inspiration or the support, in general, to be creative with it. Then there are the other people, the people who can make the changes.
>
> "

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The population in the townships is continually growing and becoming more diverse. It is essential to have a better understanding of the people living in the townships and their needs. Local citizens and leaders have taken the initiative to bring about positive changes by raising awareness and educating each other, and the community, about the diversity within the townships. With continued leadership and a rural strategy that plans for this growth, we have an opportunity to work together, learn more about each other, and celebrate the diversity that makes our rural communities so rich.

APPENDIX A

Agencies and Grassroots organizations were contacted to participate in the Rural Upstream Engagement. To ensure confidentiality this is a list of all agencies contacted.

1. African Canadian Association of Waterloo Region
2. African Family Revival Organization
3. African Women's Alliance of Waterloo Region
4. Association des francophones de Kitchener Waterloo
5. Albanian Community "Bashkimi Kombetar"
6. Armenian Community Centre of Cambridge
7. Bangladeshis in Kitchener-Waterloo
8. Bengali Students Association @ Waterloo
9. Brahmarishi Mission of Canada
10. Cambridge Muslim Society
11. Canadian Arab Women's Association
12. Canadian Hindu Cultural Society
13. Caribbean Canadian Association of Waterloo Region
14. Central Ontario Chinese Cultural Centre
15. Coalition of Muslim Women of KW
16. Elmira Community Living
17. Eritrean Islamic Community of Waterloo Region
18. Eritrean Orthodox Church
19. Ethiopian Association KW and Surrounding Areas
20. FBC Waterloo Korean Ministry
21. First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Advocacy and Advisory Circle
22. Ghanaian Canadian Association of Waterloo Region
23. Golden Triangle Sikh Association
24. Grand River Métis Council
25. Grand River Pride
26. Gujarati Cultural Association of the Golden Triangle
27. Hearts Open for Everyone - HOPE
28. India-Canada Association Waterloo Region
29. Islamic Center of Cambridge
30. Islamic Humanitarian Service
31. KW Chinese Art Centre
32. MEDA (Mennonite Economic Development Associates)
33. Mel Brown Music Festival and Symposium
34. Muslim Social Services Waterloo Region

APPENDIX A

35. Muslim Society of Waterloo and Wellington Counties
36. Muslim Women of Cambridge
37. Nigerians in the Region of Waterloo
38. NIROW Nigerians in the Region of Waterloo
39. Peace for All Canada Organization
40. Punjabi in Kitchener/Waterloo/Cambridge
41. Rohingya Centre of Canada
42. Rhythm and Blues Cambridge
43. Sanatan Bengali Cultural Association
44. Serbian Community Centre Saint George
45. Somali Canadian Association of Waterloo Region
46. SPECTRUM
47. Tamil Cultural Association of Waterloo Region
48. The DOPE Content
49. The Islamic Centre of Cambridge
50. The Pakistan Canada Association Waterloo Wellington
51. Transylvania Club
52. United Filipino Canadian Society of Waterloo Region
53. University of Waterloo Korean Students Association
54. UW PSA - Pakistani Students' Association
55. UW Clubs Manager
56. Waterloo Arab Student Association
57. Waterloo Punjabi Association (WPA)
58. Woolwich Pride
59. Waterloo First Korean Presbyterian Church
60. Several individuals were contacted as Key Informants

ENGAGE RURAL

Reach Out to Us

Community Engagement Team

226.751.4871

engagerural@gmail.com

@engagerural

January 2024

Community Care Concepts of Woolwich, Wellesley and Wilmot

ICC Interfaith Counselling Centre

North Dumfries Community Health Centre

Porchlight Counselling + Addiction Services

Wilmot Family Resource Centre

WCHC Community Health Centre

Woolwich Community Services — Together Making A Difference

Woolwich Counselling Centre

Funded by: Upstream Fund