



Health and Social Service Agencies – Service Delivery

Summary of Upstream Interviews

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These are high-level themes that have emerged from 21 one-on-one interviews conducted to date. Interviews included three key informants, four municipal government (mayor and staff) eight core agencies, and 14 health and social service agencies (Tier one to three).

The themes are organized alphabetically not by level of importance.

AWARENESS OF THE RURAL AGENCIES AND SERVICES

The Community

When speaking with the collaborative agencies there is a general question 'Are we reaching those who need our services?' How do we get people to know what is available – before it is an emergency? The agencies want to be known in the communities for providing several services and support, and the community knows where to go before it becomes a crisis. By providing a wide variety of services they can provide services that help build a sense of community and connection that address the social determinants of health.

The need to increase awareness of Services before people need them is a challenge. We need a grab that is not based on need, fear or insecurity. We need to capture all walks of life – Is this a collective message and the role of the collaborative?

The Government – Municipal and Regional

As a system, there are varying levels of awareness and relationships with the rural agencies. Often there are multiple requests from various departments to one-off agencies when trying to reach the rural population. As a result – when seeking input from townships it is often concentrated to a few voices. At the regional level, there is movement internally to better understand the departments and understand there is a need to broaden the table to agencies.

AWARENESS OF THE RURAL AGENCIES AND SERVICES

Agencies – Tier 1 to 3

Through interviews with various agencies in the region, it has become evident that there is a lack of consistent understanding regarding the agencies that operate within the townships and who to contact for assistance. Some agencies have reported that they lack the resources to extend their services beyond urban areas. Meanwhile, other agencies have limited connections with rural agencies and rely on one-off relationships to reach the townships. It was also discussed how certain regional agencies that provide services to townships employ a top-down approach and do not allow for input from rural agencies.

Many agencies have also expressed that they are uncertain about how to reach the intended population in rural townships. Establishing a relationship with rural agencies is crucial to delivering services to these areas. Some agencies have even stated that they would not be able to provide their services without the support of rural agencies.

Rural can be used as an advocacy tool – In the Family Outreach Annual Report, the House of Friendship stated they hired a part-time rural family outreach to serve the four townships, at an additional cost to HoF. While the agencies welcome the dedicated staff – the agency is funded to provide family outreach to the region and the lack of staff support is a system issue, not a rural issue as stated in the report.

The Smart Waterloo Region Innovation Lab (SWRIL) is currently working on a project to map out the locations where agencies provide their services. The data is being requested by the funder, as many agencies claim to offer services across the region but do not keep track of their service delivery locations. This project may shed light on whether or not the townships are truly receiving the services they need.

The Collaborative

There are different levels of relationships and partnerships among the collaborative and various agencies within the system. As we progress with Mapping the Services, we will gain a better understanding of each agency's role and identify any gaps.

Historically, the agencies in the 3W townships have worked closely together because of their service delivery mandates and proximity. Rural Realities helped strengthen relationships among the four townships, creating a united voice for rural areas. However, there is still work to be done in building a rural collaboration across the four townships, understanding each other's services, and finding ways to work together more effectively. Overall, there is a sense that we are making progress toward this goal.

AWARENESS OF THE RURAL AGENCIES AND SERVICES

Staff

In the past, rural agencies took pride in knowing each other and the services they provided. This approach was crucial for effective service delivery, and we often had events and opportunities to visit each other's sites. However, due to the pandemic, there has been a significant turnover of staff, and we no longer know each other as well as we used to. This is a common issue across all levels of government and agencies.

Staff needs to be aware of the available services and how to connect people with them, as there is a lot of information to keep track of, and it's constantly changing. Since we understand that staff members are busy, increasing their awareness and connections with each other may lead to smoother service delivery.

COMMITMENT TO THE COLLABORATION

It was felt that the collaborative is working towards a unified Voice for Rural and advocating for their needs. There is still work to do to unite the voices of the four townships. The collaboration reduces isolation and builds an understanding of township service delivery needs. We complement each other's services and have found innovative solutions to meet service demands and staffing challenges. The Collaboration is fluid and open to change.

It was identified that we need a mechanism in place to ensure open and ongoing communication. While there were no preferences or models put forward it was identified by several people the Rural Recovery table was not the ideal forum to move this Upstream collaboration forward. Many people discussed the Rural Realities Network and there were also mixed feelings about the effectiveness of that model.

COMMUNITY DRIVEN APPROACH

THE HEARTBEAT OF THE COMMUNITY

The agencies and volunteers are seen as an asset to a community and a trusted entity in the community. Throughout the townships, the agencies have name recognition and a level of trust.

The community supports these agencies both with time and financial contributions.

A physical location is key to service delivery as it builds a sense of place and community for all.

- People trust and have a connection to the agency and the people who work there.
- Having a physical presence in the township is important to the community.
 - Makes it easier for people to come and seek support and fellowship.
- Not as busy and overwhelming for people as compared to the urban centers.

Multi-purpose sites provide a safe welcoming place and reduce the stigma as they provide a level of anonymity in rural areas as all community programs are delivered in the same location.

These rural serving agencies are the community's response to building an equitable community and responding to a need. Many of these agencies work with local businesses and together they help bring awareness of the need in the community and the support that is available. Volunteers provide added human resource support and they become ambassadors for the agencies in the community.

DEMOGRAPHICS ARE CHANGING

During the interviews, all groups agreed that it is essential to plan for future growth and potential services. It's crucial to understand the number of new families, residences, and the diverse cultures and backgrounds of these populations residing in the townships now and in the future. Unfortunately, we lack accurate demographic data on who we are currently serving and the changing demographics of the communities and their needs.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Our agencies have realized that there is a lack of understanding about the people we serve because we do not collect information about their ethnicity, race, or religion. This was intentional for some agencies to make the services more accessible, but it has led to a lack of knowledge about who is not receiving necessary services, what those services are, and any potential barriers to accessing them.

In rural townships where the population is smaller, it is challenging to gather data while still maintaining confidentiality. We need to find ways to disaggregate the data to gain a better understanding of the community.

There is a general feeling that there is a lack of good data across the region. This is particularly evident in the townships. As we continue to collect more information, we must also consider how we can involve people in the process in a respectful and meaningful way. We need to approach this through an anti-racist and trauma-informed perspective. We must deliberate about the data we collect and the reasons behind it.

We should also apply this perspective to our hiring practices and discussions surrounding equity and inclusivity. We need to identify and tackle systemic obstacles within the agency, community, and structures. We need to track and disaggregate the data to have these crucial conversations. We must recognize that there have been some contentious incidents in the townships. As a community, we need to come together to heal and create an inclusive environment. What can the townships do to attract a more diverse group of people? How do our actions as a township or employer affect why people don't apply for positions in the townships?

Additionally, we must consider the existing populations such as the diversity within our Mennonite communities. There's much we don't know about how to connect with these populations.

We must expand our services to address these issues.

- Immigrants who come to the area are not always aware of the activities available to them. This is a gap that we need to fill.
- We need to investigate who lives in the community and who uses our services.
- There are natural push-pull factors in rural areas, and depending on the community, people may opt to go to a larger center.

FUNDING LEVELS AND ALLOCATIONS

The collaborative has a range of agencies with various funding allocations based on organizational size and services. Agencies are struggling with inadequate funding allocation that is not keeping up with the growing population and complex needs. Some agencies piece together a funding model that hinders the agency's ability to engage and be invested in the work as there is only so much that can be done with limited resources. Additionally, managing multiple funders and various project funding, including government, regional funding, and small community grants, becomes quite challenging and time-consuming. A dedicated funding source would alleviate the burden of managing different pockets of funding and lead to less reporting.

Funding opportunities vary, and smaller agencies feel they are overlooked. Social service agencies do not receive the same attention as health agencies. Health is a big portfolio and health agencies often have a place at more planning tables.

“
It's concerning that agencies are competing for the pockets of funding or a place at the table when we know that we are not meeting the needs.
”

Unfortunately, there is still a feeling of internal competition based on resources, influence, and survival, which begs the question: Who are we truly serving? Through collaboration, there is an opportunity to overcome some of these challenges.

Looking towards other collaborative service delivery models, such as the counselling collaborative, there are lessons to learn in how to collectively bring funds into the region and distribute them equitably. There is strength in a unified approach and reduces the competition for resources as they are pooled and distributed across the system. The collaborative has developed an agreed-upon process to ensure that everyone has an equal voice.

FUNDING LEVELS AND ALLOCATIONS

Support from local Government

Different townships provide different levels of support, expectations, and relationships to health and social service agencies. The municipalities are questioning their role in supporting the sustainability of community agencies. Some believe they should have a larger role in supporting the agencies while others believe it is the responsibility of the region or other funding bodies. Some townships are considering their role in supporting this growth because the agencies are currently stretched and lack the capacity to respond.

There is a growing importance of looking at big-picture solutions to collectively support the agencies. This could be done by providing a grant writer and examining how to provide regular sustainable funding. The townships themselves offer varied services such as community programs, youth programs, health, and wellness programs, as well as opportunities for sports and volunteering. Some townships provide direct financial support for agencies to provide these programs, while others deliver them themselves. Some municipalities have expressed dissatisfaction with the services provided by the agencies and wish for more options within the township. However, there is no funding attached to the request.

The relationship between the region and townships is complex, with differing opinions on who should be supporting rural agencies. Some have strong alliances with the region and advocate for services while others feel excluded or inferior.

GEOGRAPHY AND THE RURAL LANDSCAPE

Delivering services in the townships presents a significant challenge, particularly in terms of geography. Service delivery with a rural focus must take into account both geography and population density. Due to the size of our townships, it can be difficult to bring people together and create a sense of community. Smaller hamlets may feel excluded and left out. These hamlets are growing at different rates and may not receive the same level of attention as those communities where growth is more concentrated.

To develop a model of excellence in rural service delivery, we need strong collaboration and partnerships. As our rural communities continue to grow and change, we must collectively understand what success looks like when providing services to these rural areas. Delivering services to a large geographic area with a small population is challenging, and this must be reflected in how services are delivered. Building a sense of cohesion is vital to building a sense of community.

Some organizations are rethinking traditional service delivery models, recognizing that requiring clients to come to an office may not be the most accessible method. Increasing accessibility by exploring the use of community locations where people can drop in and receive support and respite is important.

It's important to pay attention to the broad geographic area we serve. Even though we are in larger hamlets, we must understand how to serve the communities in between that may not receive adequate support. We are committed to ensuring that our services are accessible and easy to reach for everyone in need.

Having a physical location with easy access to local services is essential. While we currently have a presence in a few areas of the township, we aim to expand our reach to serve more people. We must work with them to ensure that people across the township receive adequate support, regardless of location.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

The population is growing rapidly, leading to an increase in demand for health, social, and mental health services. However, funding is not keeping up with this demand, causing a shortage in capacity. As a result, many programs have long waitlists as they fill up quickly.

“
I don't know anyone who is not operating at capacity.
”

In the health and social service sector, many organizations are facing similar challenges. However, rural organizations are in a unique position as they are often the only group funded to deliver services in their township and surrounding areas. When these services are full, residents must seek support from agencies outside their community, adding financial costs and transportation difficulties.

This shortage of capacity also limits what agencies can do. Without the time to build partnerships, they are unable to expand their core services and remain in their silo.

This scarcity creates a culture in which only those who are already connected to the system are successful in accessing programs and services. Waitlists are implemented, but they can still be frustrating for those who are not already connected. This means that services are not reaching those who need them the most, as they operate on a first-come, first-serve basis.

THE SYSTEM IS COMPLEX AND REQUIRES SKILLS AND TECHNOLOGY TO ACCESS

The system we are working with is complex and staff have found that people lack the technology and skills to access services. We must look at how services are delivered to reduce the complexity people must navigate through. From an upstream approach, we need to look at how to improve or change the system so that people are not reliant on others just to navigate through a complex web of service. The current system is a challenge for professionals to navigate let alone someone in crisis. Services need to be equitable and accessible to meet people where they are at. Having a physical space for people to access service.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Staff are stretched and with high turnover.

Skill Capacity

Agencies are under pressure to attract and retain quality staff who can address the growing demand and complexity of issues faced by the community. This challenge affects agencies and municipalities across the townships, as they struggle to find qualified individuals who can handle the workload, schedules, and geography required to provide effective services.

The mental health crisis has impacted everyone, and generalist agencies are often left to serve those who fall through the cracks. However, some agencies have found innovative solutions by collaborating with other organizations to bring on-site counselling support through job sharing or student placement with off-site supervision.

Recruiting and retaining staff is a time-consuming process, but without competitive compensation, staff turnover will continue to be an issue. Local governments, businesses, agencies, and communities can work together to improve service delivery, reduce costs, and encourage local solutions. Ensuring that agencies have staffing complements that can meet changing needs and provide competitive compensation is key to achieving these goals.

Representation

As a community, we strive to make our workplace representative of our population. We acknowledge that the rural population is evolving, and we aim to ensure that our staff reflects this change. For instance, agencies have endeavoured to recruit more Mennonites who speak low German to support this population.

HUMAN RESOURCES

However, we recognize that there are still systematic barriers that people face in accessing the services they need. To address this issue, we need to work collectively as agencies and as a community. We have had many discussions about how to educate our community and address different forms of discrimination. We must establish a solid understanding both within our agencies and the community. We need to be more intentional in our actions, as how we deliver services can lead to assimilation.

“ Staff say things like “Why we don’t serve those groups (sic) because they don’t ‘see’ it.”

Due to the current funding model and staffing levels, the demand for services has surpassed the allocated funding for the sector. The population growth and demand for services have not been kept up, leading to immense pressure on the current system. This leaves little room for strategic outreach and expansion of services to cater to the needs of the growing population. As a result, staff and resources are overworked and challenged by a lack of available options in rural areas.

SYSTEM LEVEL ISSUES

We need to engage in meaningful discussions about the services we offer and our place in the community. This means addressing difficult topics like colonization, power dynamics, and systemic transformation. Let's not shy away from tackling these significant issues. Instead, we should strive to gain a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews, learn from them, and integrate them into our approach to working together, providing services, and fostering resilient rural communities.

ENGAGE RURAL



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