2024

Unveiling Best Practices for Outreach with Unhoused Persons in the Downtown Core:
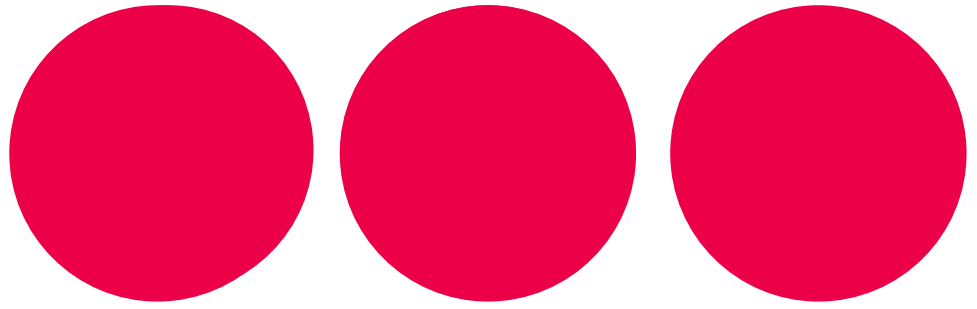
A Case Study of Belleville and the Welcoming Streets Model

Applied Research Project Report

Centre for Healthy Communities | LOYALiST COLLEGE Applied Research & Innovation Office

Applied Research at Loyalist College

The Applied Research and Innovation Office (ARIO) at Loyalist College develops the capacity for applied research. ARIO helps to advance the development of inquiry and research activities to enhance student experience and support faculty and staff researchers, facilitates connections with external partners, and supports the internal Research Ethics Board by ensuring members review and approve research involving humans. ARIO has played a key role in supporting applied research projects within various schools across the college. The Centre for Healthy Communities is rooted within ARIO. To learn more about ARIO's services, please visit https://loyalistappliedresearch.com/

LOYALIST COLLEGE Applied Research & Innovation Office

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Projects can:

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- Assess partners' existing programs for effectiveness
- Identify equity gaps in existing services and best practices for accessibility
- Design and/or trial new services
- Increase shared knowledge & coordinate responses among organizations
- Develop training to leverage learning to inform partners
- Study successful services for applicability in other Canadian regions

Centre for Healthy Communities

LOYALIST COLLEGE Applied Research & Innovation Office

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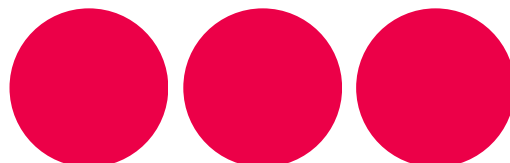**Centre for Healthy Communities**
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Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Principal Investigator...

To The Team – Thanks to Sara Behring for collaborating with Loyalist on this project. To Grace, Robbie, Anjali and Pabindra it was a pleasure working with you and your contributions were valuable.

To ARIO – Thank you for the guidance and support at all stages of the research project.

To the respondents – Thank you for taking the time to provide your valuable information.

Special Thank You – A special acknowledgement needs to be made for our community consultant, Colin Wright. As a person with lived experience who is strongly connected to the unhoused community, his feedback on research design was impactful and it was his leg work that resulted in strong attendance at the in person focus groups. This speaks to the importance of engaging with a population impacted by the subject of research to achieve quality results.
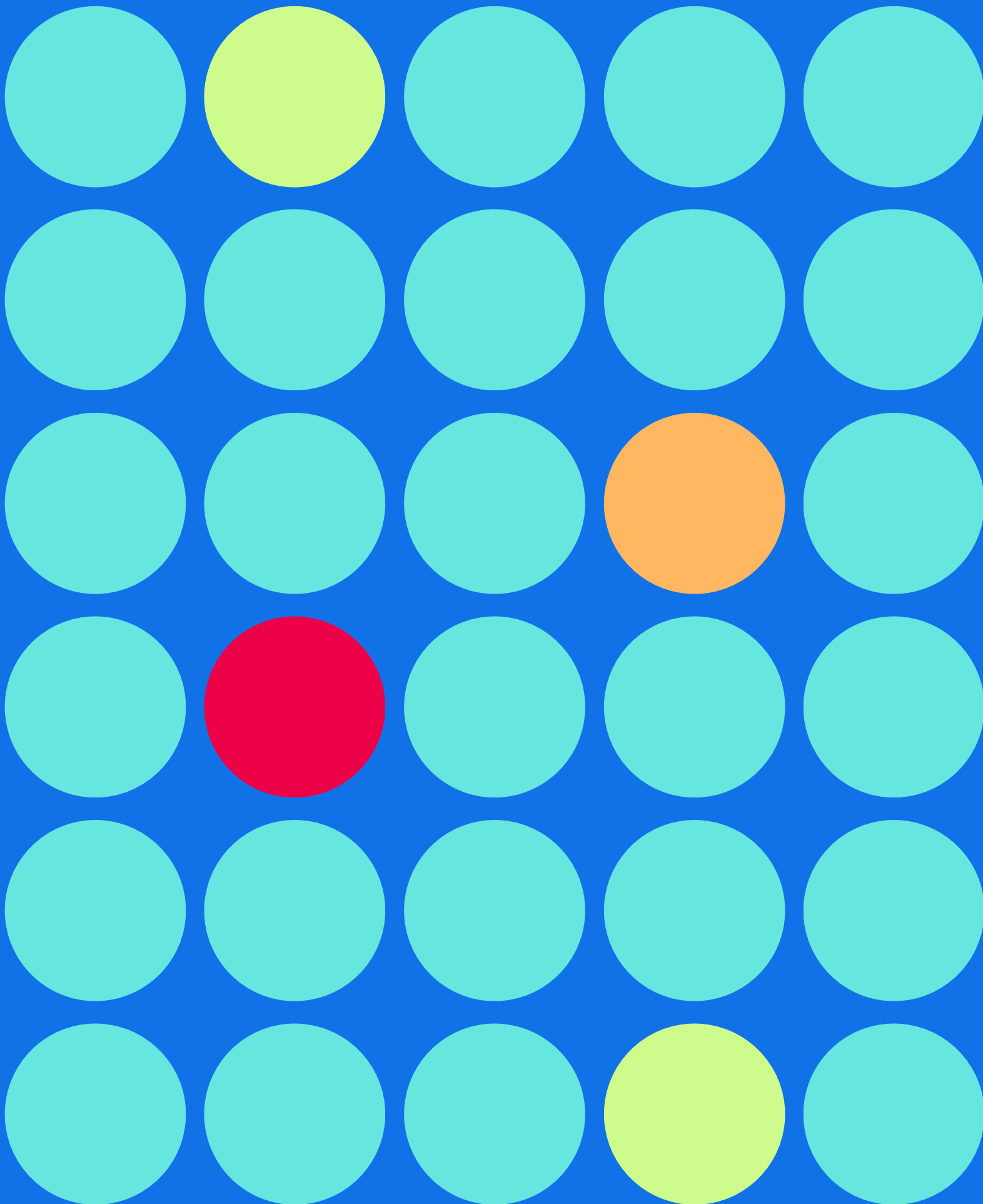

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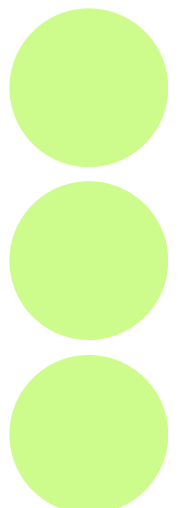
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Background

Context

Belleville, like many Ontario municipalities, is facing a crisis of homelessness. A report released in January 2022, stated that 237 people were identified in Belleville as homeless. This is a 12% increase since the 2018 report and it is suspected that 2023/24 numbers will see a further increase.

Of the persons surveyed, 49 were unsheltered, 37 were in emergency shelters, 29 were in transitional housing, 79 persons were staying with others (hidden homelessness), one person reported being in an institution (hospital, jail, treatment) and 42 respondents had an indeterminate status (Hastings County, 2022).

Unhoused individuals in Belleville often reside in the downtown core to be close to services. This can create tensions (real or stigma based) with residents and businesses that live and operate there.

Outreach programs like Welcoming Streets were created to:

- Mitigate tensions amongst downtown stakeholders through relationship and situation management

- Support unhoused individuals by connecting them to services

- Provide education and communication support to the broader community

Welcoming Streets Belleville

In Belleville, "The Welcoming Streets Program is designed to support the Downtown Business Improvement Association (DBIA) business and vulnerable individuals simultaneously by addressing business concerns and providing direct systems navigation support" (Welcoming Streets Belleville, 2024). These programs engage directly with local businesses, local agencies, and unhoused persons towards the maintenance of a safe and welcoming downtown core.

Key goals of service are:

Reducing unnecessary calls to the local police department

Enhancing community safety

Referrals to housing and mental health and substance use supports

Fostering therapeutic relationships via empathy and inclusivity

Raising awareness through community education

Welcoming Streets Across Ontario

While there are varying forms of outreach to unhoused populations across Ontario, the "Welcoming Streets" model is active in six Ontario communities, and is a relatively new approach. The defining feature of these programs: they are directed by the local Business Improvement Association (BIA) and supported by their local municipalities.

1.   In Ontario, Guelph was the first program to pilot this model. Beginning in 2018, the five-month pilot reported 670 client interactions, 145 calls for support, 24 presentations to local businesses and agencies in the downtown core (Welcoming Streets Initiative, 2024).This program runs out of the Guelph Community Health Center.

2.   Welcoming Streets Durham began in 2019 and operates out of the Durham Community Health Center as part of their Unsheltered Health and Wellness programs (Unsheltered Health and Wellness, 2024).

3.   Welcoming Streets Belleville was launched in 2021 to support the vulnerable population and businesses. This program is operated by the Downtown Belleville BIA (Welcoming Streets Belleville, 2024).

4.   Welcoming Streets Brampton was established in 2022 and is funded by Peel Region in association with the City of Brampton (Welcoming Streets Pilot, 2024).

5.   Welcoming Streets Kingston was established in 2023 and operates through a collaborative partnership between three organizations: The City of Kingston; Downtown Kingston BIA; and Lennox and Addington Mental Health and Addiction Services (AMHS-KFLA) (Welcoming Streets Kingston, 2024).

6.   The newest Welcoming Streets program in Ontario is in Sudbury. The program was initiated in February 2024, forged as a partnership between the downtown Sudbury BIA and The Go-Give Project (Welcoming Streets Program, 2024).

Timeline:

- 2018 → 1. Guelph Community Health Center
- 2019 → 2. Durham Community Health Center
- 2021 → 3. Welcoming Streets Belleville
- 2022 → 4. Welcoming Streets Brampton
- 2023 → 5. Welcoming Streets Kingston
- 2024 → 6. Welcoming Streets Sudbury
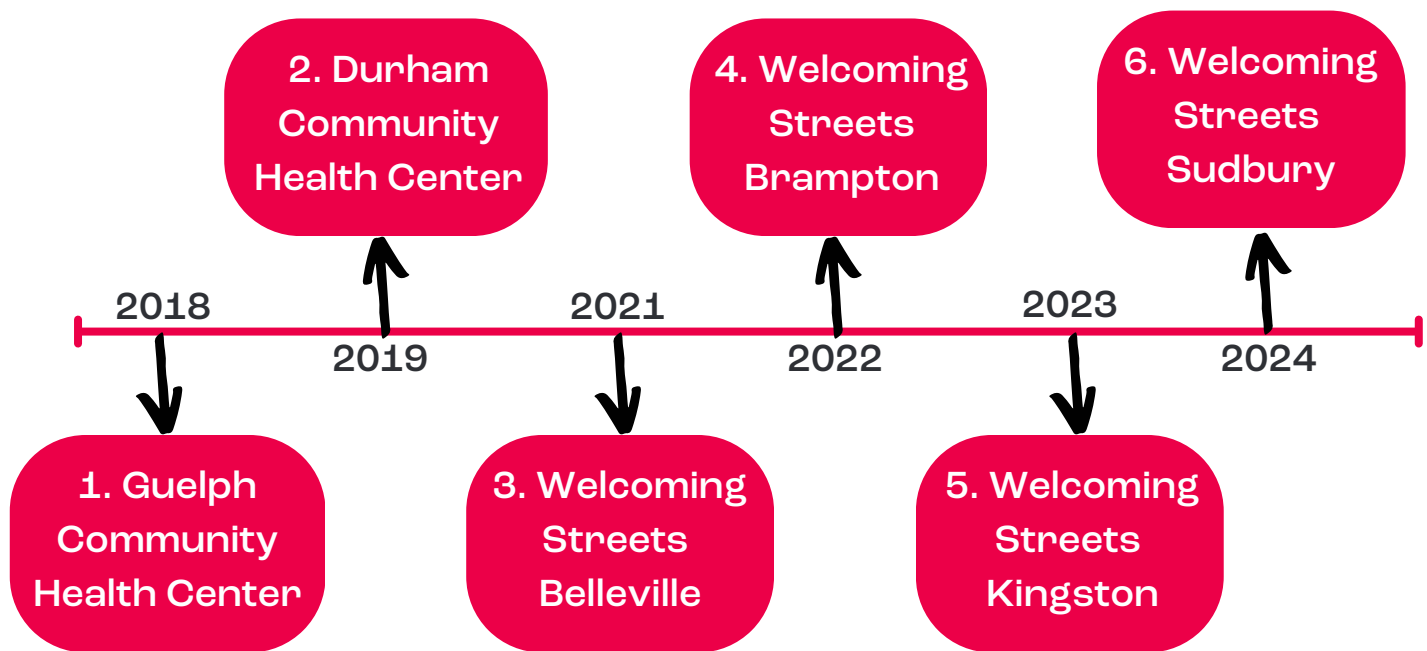
For additional context, it is important to consider that the pressure on both housing people and on economic stressors to downtown businesses will increase the need for programs such as Welcoming Streets on Ontario downtowns.

"Deteriorating housing affordability following the onset of the pandemic, combined with higher unemployment and fewer job vacancies in recent months, along with a surge in inflation throughout 2021 and 2022, has led to higher costs for essential goods and services" (Statistics Canada, 2023). The economic downturn places additional pressures on small business owners and the community at large and has led to the increase in numbers of unhoused people across the country. According to a 2024 Statistics Canada study, the revenue drops felt by small businesses in 2022-23 are expected to continue into 2024 (Tam et al., 2024).

Throughout the development of this project, Welcoming Streets Belleville has offered consultation to four additional Ontario cities that are expecting to bring a program of this nature to their community. A Welcoming Streets program has since been approved in St. Catherine's, Niagara Region.

Project Objectives

Project Purpose

Welcoming Streets programs are a relatively new and unique innovation to address the impact of homelessness on downtown cores. As with any new program, there is a need for evaluation to determine its effectiveness. This project studies the impact of Welcoming Streets Belleville and investigates best practices for a downtown outreach program that supports unhoused persons and the community stakeholders by which they live alongside.

To support this goal, feedback was collected from service users, persons with lived experience, business owners, community partners, and front-line staff. Front-line staff consultations were held with Welcoming Streets staff from Belleville as well as other locations, to compile a list of best practices that extends beyond the Belleville perspective.

Perspectives of "welcome" and "unwelcome" were explored, to provide a baseline understanding of the intended purpose of the program and if it is effective in meeting its own inherent agenda. Strategies, interventions, and methods of support were explored to discover what best meets the mutual needs of various downtown stakeholders. How can business owners continue to operate without threat to their livelihoods, while also supporting a hands up approach to the homeless that live among them? A hand's up approach is a term suggested by a person of lived experience where persons are not offered a "hand out", but rather, a "hand up" to improve their situation. This approach emphasizes capacity building and empowerment.

Project Goals

1 Explore the impact of Belleville's "Welcoming Streets" program, and perspectives on the concept of "welcoming" in reference to Belleville's downtown.

2 Explore strategies, interventions, supports, and approaches for Welcoming Streets programs to meet the needs of unhoused persons and the community partners/business owners that engage in their lives.

3 Explore the resources required to ensure program sustainability.

Clarification of Project Scope

While Welcoming Streets programs assist persons and community members affected by homelessness, they do not tackle the primary issues driving homelessness itself. Similarly, this project does not address root causes of homelessness, but rather, how communities can best provide support and outreach to stakeholders in the downtown core, in relation to homelessness.

Literature Review

Although programs in collaboration with BIAs and municipalities are a relatively novel response to homelessness in Canada, homelessness outreach programs are well-established and well-studied.

Effective approaches to delivering outreach to unhoused populations have been stated as (Thompson, iii, 2011,):

- treating homeless persons respectfully so they feel valued;
- maintaining links with housing providers; and
- maintaining links with community service agencies.

To meet these outreach goals, Thompson notes staff need to be empathetic and flexible and must be knowledgeable about the unique problems faced by unhoused persons (iv, 2011). Included in Thompson's recommendations are:

- considerations for job security;
- case load size;
- multi-agency collaboration;
- addressing overall service capacity in communities;
- access to funds for rental supplements; and
- a team approach with significant opportunity for debrief.

Smith et al. (2023), note that outreach is focused on meeting people where they are at (physically and socially) and seeking out those who differ from the public with a convivial approach. They highlight the importance of space in relation to creating a community for all, noting there is a lack of "free space" in urban communities where unhoused persons can exist.

Acknowledging the benefits and challenges of persons residing in urban areas, Smith et al. note, "Convivial spaces are informal gathering places where people share resources and engage in activities. Material features like radios and cigarettes become ingrained in encounters. However, these spaces can be uncomfortable due to new faces and can be quickly destroyed, necessitating management for their maintenance" (2023).

In discussing this notion, Smith et al. discuss the importance of creating convivial spaces in homelessness outreach, and the equally challenging ability of maintaining them (2023). It is in this duality of tension that outreach workers operate.

In the ethnography titled Footwork, Hall highlights outreach workers connect with unhoused people in non-traditional places, exercise curiosity, and employ a roundabout approach to the issues encountered (2017). This takes place in the complex arena of inequality and what Hall call's, "the symbolic border where we see them [homeless individuals] as living apart from us… perhaps because of our uncomfortable closeness to them" (128, 2017).

While it differs in social and environmental context, a common theme amongst research about front-line work with the unhoused population, is that it often describes the positive impact to both those experiencing homelessness and those providing the outreach and intervention.
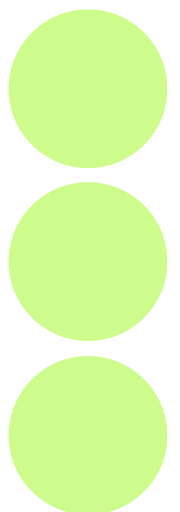
Key Terms

Outreach

Outreach in social services refers to the practice of actively reaching out to potential clients where they may be. This includes offering service to potential service users. This contrasts with a model where clients attend at the location of the service providers.

A Hands Up Approach

A hands up approach was the term that was suggested by persons with lived experience to reflect and approach where persons are not offered a "hand out" but rather offered a hand up to improve their situation.

Convivial Spaces

Informal gathering places where people share resources and engage in activities.

Health Equity

According to Public Health Ontario, "Health equity is created when individuals have the fair opportunity to reach their fullest health potential. Achieving health equity requires reducing unnecessary and avoidable differences that are unfair and unjust. Many causes of health inequities relate to social and environmental factors including income, social status, race, gender, education and physical environment. We offer expertise and resources for integrating health equity in health promotion programs and policies" (2024).

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory action research speaks to a model of research that directly involves the persons being "studied" in a collaborative process of research, aimed at a more detailed, informed, and change-driven result. In engaging subjects in the research project, it is asserted that this creates a more realistic vision of the social reality studied (van de Sande, 2017).

People/Persons of Lived Experience (POLE)

In the purpose of this study, the people of lived experience (POLE) are those currently facing, or having had recently faced, a life of homelessness in the downtown of Belleville.

Methodology

Research Design

The research process was co-designed by faculty and students of the Social Service Worker (SSW) program at Loyalist College in Belleville and supported by Welcoming Streets Belleville, the Centre for Healthy Communities, and persons of lived experience. The lead Researcher, Jennifer Abrams, is a Registered Social Worker with over 20 years of front-line experience working with the unhoused populations of Belleville and the surrounding areas. Secondary researcher, Sara Behring, is the Community Outreach Director with Welcoming Streets Belleville. The research team also included four student research assistants from the Social Service Worker program at Loyalist college, one of which has lived experience of homelessness. Lastly, a community consultant with lived experience was identified and recruited by the Welcoming Streets Program to assist with research design. Prior to any data collection, the project and its methodology was approved by Loyalist College's institutional Research Ethics Board.

The research design was informed by a health equity lens and based on practices of participatory action research.

Research Methods

Information was gathered using two methods – surveys and focus groups – with three distinct populations: persons with lived experience of homelessness; community partner agency staff and downtown business owners; and front-line staff from Welcoming Streets programs across Ontario.

Recruitment

Lived experience participants were recruited by Welcoming Streets staff, community partner agencies, and an on-the-ground POLE consultant, using poster and word-of-mouth. Downtown businesses were recruited directly via email to their organizations. Through the DBBIA mailing list, efforts were made to connect with all businesses in Downtown Belleville. Community partner agencies and front-line staff from other Welcoming Streets programs were contacted via email, based on previously established relationships by the research partner, Welcoming Streets Belleville. All emails to businesses, community partners, and staff included an invitation to participate and a poster with more information. All participation was voluntary.
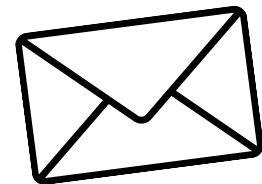
Participants
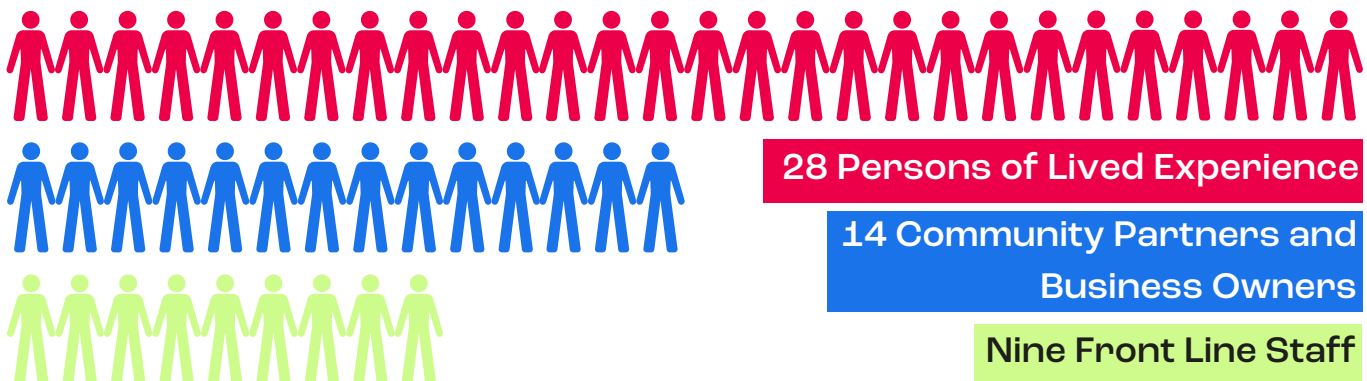
28 Persons of Lived Experience

14 Community Partners and Business Owners

Nine Front Line Staff

Data Collection

Data was collected from September to October 2024. Online surveys were distributed via QR codes on all posters and this data was collected using Microsoft Forms. Some surveys with persons of lived experience were collected in person, during a visit to the Bridge Street United Drop-In, using paper surveys. This paper data was then entered into the Microsoft Forms survey, as if the person entering it was the participant.

Data was collected as follows:
- 28 online surveys were completed by persons of lived experience
- Seven of those same POLE individuals took part in one of two in-person focus groups
- 14 business owners and community partners completed online surveys (with similar questions to the POLE surveys, although recorded separately)
- Nine front-line staff from five different Welcoming Streets programs across Ontario participated in one of three online focus groups
- In summary, 32 surveys (from two participant groups) and five focus groups (from two participant groups) were completed. Business owners/community partners completed surveys only. Front-line staff completed focus groups only. Some POLE individuals completed surveys only and others completed both surveys and focus group.

All data was anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. Persons with lived experience were compensated for their participation.

Survey questions were similar for both those with lived experience and business owners/community partners. Focus groups for persons of lived experience were designed with a selection of questions from the survey, allowing participants to expand on their answers to the open-ended questions. Focus groups with front-line staff of the programs asked an entirely different set of questions.

Data Analysis

All closed-ended survey questions revealed quantitative data that was analyzed using descriptive statistics. These questions were designed to understand the context for who had responded, their community knowledge, and perception of the Welcoming Streets program. Quantitative survey data was amalgamated using the Survey Responses tool in Forms.

Open-ended question responses were analyzed using thematic evaluation – both of long answer survey responses and focus group responses. Through this method, keywords and quotations are refined into themes for analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). Qualitative data was reviewed by three members of the research team, who highlighted key quotes and identified key themes. Themes were broadly pre-established by the research questions, and sub-themes mostly fell within each response.

This report is intentionally quote-heavy, as prioritizing the voices of research participants is in keeping with a social justice approach to research, where general profiles of the participants and frequent quotes are provided in the discussion (van de Sande, A., Schwartz, K., 2017).

Limitations

The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Responses included in the data are only of those willing to participate in the survey, and therefore, does not include the entirety of opinions that exist in the downtown. In the process of advertising and recruiting for the survey, rich conversations were had with potential participants that were not captured in the data (no consent was signed, and the conversations were not recorded). There is anecdotal evidence that points to the fact that are many more polarizing views and perspectives from each stakeholder group that pins them further apart from one another than what has been captured in this study.

The study did not capture voices of all downtown stakeholder groups. We recognize that the voice of housed persons residing in the downtown core may have been relevant to creating a more fulsome story, but this voice was not captured. This population was not included due to concerns of project scope and the timeline of the project.

Misaligned grouping of Community Organizations and Business Owners. We realized partway through the data collection process that the experiences and opinions of business owners were much different than those of community partner agencies and organizations (of which are providing direct services to the homeless population). If this research were to be completed again, survey responses of each group would have been collected and analyzed independently of one another.

Time of data capture took place after significant and irregular downtown event. This project began in January 2024. In February 2024, the city of Belleville experienced a state of emergency regarding opioid overdoses, with 17 overdoses over 48 hours. This event was impactful to the community and may have shaped opinions and impacted response rates. Furthermore, the data collection period directly followed the annual feedback process of the Welcoming Streets program, which may have affected responses of both business owners, community partners, and front-line workers.
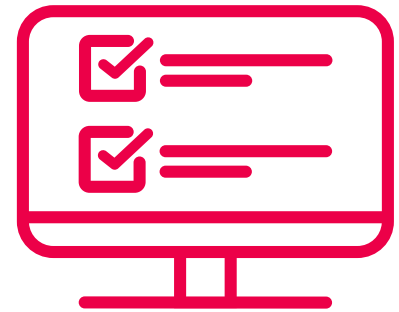
Error on printed POLE survey. The printed survey for persons of lived experience included a small error. Questions 10 and 11 did not have the full rating scale available for participants to respond in the same way that online participants did. In the question, "From your perspective, how effective has the Welcoming Street Program been in meeting the stated goals of…", respondants were unable to select "very ineffective" or "somewhat ineffective" and only had options from "neither effective nor ineffective" and to "very ineffective". Similarly, in the question, "Welcoming Streets began in 2021. Since that time, there has been a noticeable impact in the downtown core," respondants were only able to choose "neither agree or disagree" and better. The options of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" were not included.

Transcription software was not always accurate. Transcripts returned from Microsoft Teams transcript tool were not completely accurate, providing opportunity for lost data. However, the lead researcher was present at all focus groups and was able to revise the transcripts for clarity. Any data presented that remained unclear was unused.

Inherent researcher bias. While emerging themes appeared clear and evident, and the subject matter was exceedingly complex, it must be noted that in any qualitative research, there is always room for inherent bias in the fact that themes are determined and interpreted by humans with their own sets of opinions, experiences, and perspectives.

Results

The combination of surveys and focus groups returned rich results. The first half of this section discusses responses from those of lived experience with homelessness and community partners and business owners together. The second half discusses responses of front-line staff from Welcoming Streets programs across Ontario.

Responses from Belleville's Downtown Stakeholders

Due to the similarity of questions posed to POLE participants and business owners/community partner agencies, responses are shared side-by-side. For ease of communication, the group of business owners and community partner agencies may be referred to collectively as organizations.

Connections to & Knowledge of Program

When asked if respondents had made a connection with the program, 64% of organizations and 59% of POLE, had made a connection.

Have you made a connection with "Welcoming Streets"?

Yes — No
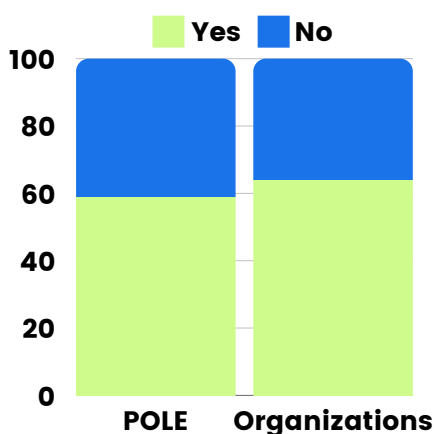
Although you have not made a connection, do you know about the program?

Yes — No
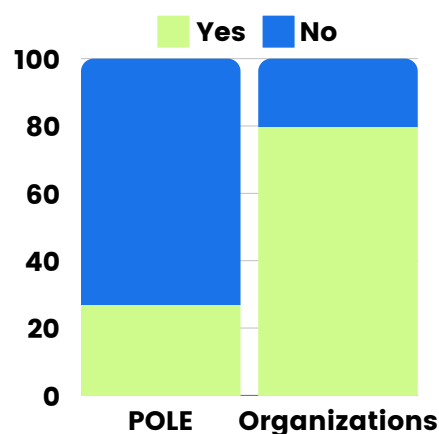
21% of total respondents (eight POLE & one organization) have noted that they are completely unaware of the program, indicating a need for more public communication and awareness campaigns.

When asked about their knowledge of the program, POLE respondents who have connected with the program referred to positive themes, using words such as: help/helping/helpful, connection, supplies, and friendly. Those that connected, made statements such as "If you need help, guidance, supplies, water, snacks. Those are the guys to talk to" (POLE 23, Sept. 25, 2024).
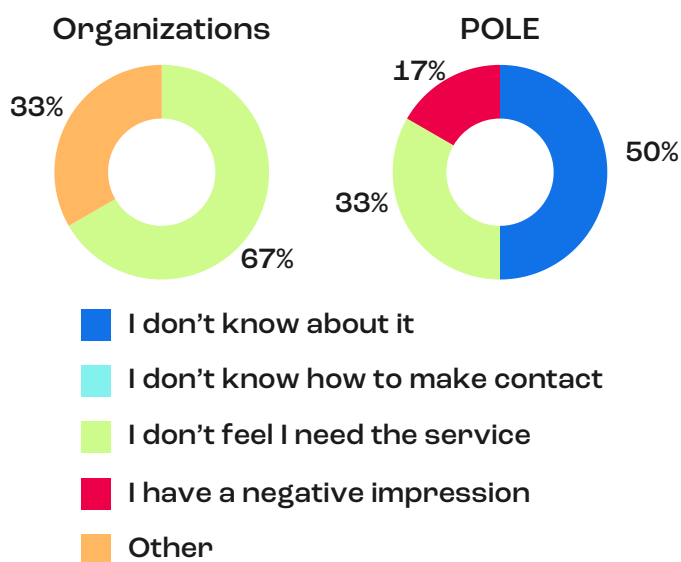
Organization respondents also referred to common themes of support, using words such as: help/assistance/support, referral, education/training, resources, relationships, or collaboration, and stating such quotes as, "They are always friendly, responsive and do their best to assist both us as a business and homeless people to find the resources that get them off the street," (Business/Organization 10, Oct. 10, 2024).

Focus group discussions indicated that even for those who are aware of the program, there is also sometimes a misunderstanding about the nature of the program and its offerings. "To me there's a bit of confusion as to what exactly their role is out here" (POLE 25, Sept 25, 2024).

When asked of those that had not made a connection, "do you wish to?" 60% of organizations and 55% of homeless, said yes, they wished to connect to the program. For those who did wish to connect, they were asked if they experienced barriers to date in accessing the service. Three POLE and one organization responded that they didn't know about the program and two POLE and one organization responded that they didn't know how to contact the staff.

For respondents who stated they are aware of the program, but have not connected, they were asked "If you do not wish to connect, can you tell us why?" This range of responses speak to the need for ongoing education and public awareness about the program.

If you do not wish to connect, can you tell us why?

Organizations

33%

67%

POLE

17%

50%

33%

- 🟦 I don't know about it
- 🟦 I don't know how to make contact
- 🟩 I don't feel I need the service
- 🟥 I have a negative impression
- 🟧 Other

The Name "Welcoming Streets"

Both Belleville organizations and POLE, were asked what the name Welcoming Streets meant to them. Responses yielded similar themes of welcoming/friendly/open; community; safe/safety/comfort; and help.

Persons of Lived Experience

"that it's open and the street is what we walk on...you can't have open welcoming streets if the people aren't going to be welcoming on the streets" (POLE 27, Sept. 25, 2024).

Four respondents with lived experience indicated "nothing" or "not applicable" in relation to the meaning of the name. This could mean simply they didn't want to or didn't know how to answer, or they didn't think the name was suitable to the service.

Community Partners & Business Owners

"It means having a sense of community amongst the residents of Belleville, and to provide a safe space for marginalized individuals you aren't always made to feel welcome on the streets" (Business/Organization 4, Sept. 26, 2024).

Organization responses returned the additional themes of "services" and "liaison", which were not referred to by POLE respondents.

Feelings of Welcome

Both stakeholder groups were also asked what makes them feel welcome and what makes them feel unwelcome in the downtown core. The purpose of this was to understand to what degree the goal of "towards the maintenance of a safe and welcoming downtown core" (Welcoming Streets Belleville, 2024) was being met.

Both groups used terminology such as "vibrant", "beautiful", and "alive". They collectively spoke of community and connections, and of the importance of friends and friendliness.

"Have you looked at a lot of the art? I happen to know the artist that does all the murals on the walls and it's just nice to look at something that's done by a member of the community. So, it's nice to see that somebody steps up and does that to add to the look of the community itself" (POLE 27, Sept. 25, 2024).

Feelings of Unwelcome

In response to what feels "unwelcome", both groups of respondents discuss active and visible substance use, drug dealing, active mental health symptoms, and violence. They describe all of these as problematic, all of which make them feel unsafe.

For persons of lived experience with homelessness, they also referred to stigma. Unhoused persons experience stigmatization and overgeneralization in relation to their situation: "There are people in our community that, you know, are addicts or, you know, are violent, but we're not all like that but they kind of just treat us all as one thing" (POLE 29, Oct. 2, 2024). It has been expressed that the community sees all unhoused persons as problematic and unsafe, when most unhoused persons have the same fears and concerns.

Also unique to persons with lived experience of homelessness, is their discomfort with uniforms. It was noted that anyone wearing any uniform may lead a potential service recipient to withdraw, owing to a history of distrust with authority.

Unique to business owners, were concerns related to the decline of street traffic and fewer open businesses. For some, this is a direct correlation to the increased presence of unhoused persons in the core. Respondents indicate that the situation in the core is reducing the customer base and people are not going downtown due to concerning and unsafe situations.

| Similar Concerns	Unique Concerns	
	Organizations	POLE
• Active and visible drug use	• Declined street traffic	• Stigma
• Drug dealing	• Fewer open businesses	• Uniforms
• Active mental health symptoms		
• Violence		

Concerns of Survival

Most striking in tone and emotion are the universal concerns about survival across both groups. For persons with lived experience, this is a day-to-day concern relating to impacts of physical and mental health and threaten their life (violence, cold, hunger, thirst). Participants with lived experience highlighted significant increase in risk for young people and women in relation to exploitation. Responses indicated that the homeless community experience additional mental and physical health risks, because they are regularly exposed. Some of these risks (and especially for woman) are risks of sexual exploitation.

Organizations

Survival of livelihood of business and income

POLE

Daily survival concerning physical and mental health, and threats to life (i.e., thirst, hunger, cold, violence)
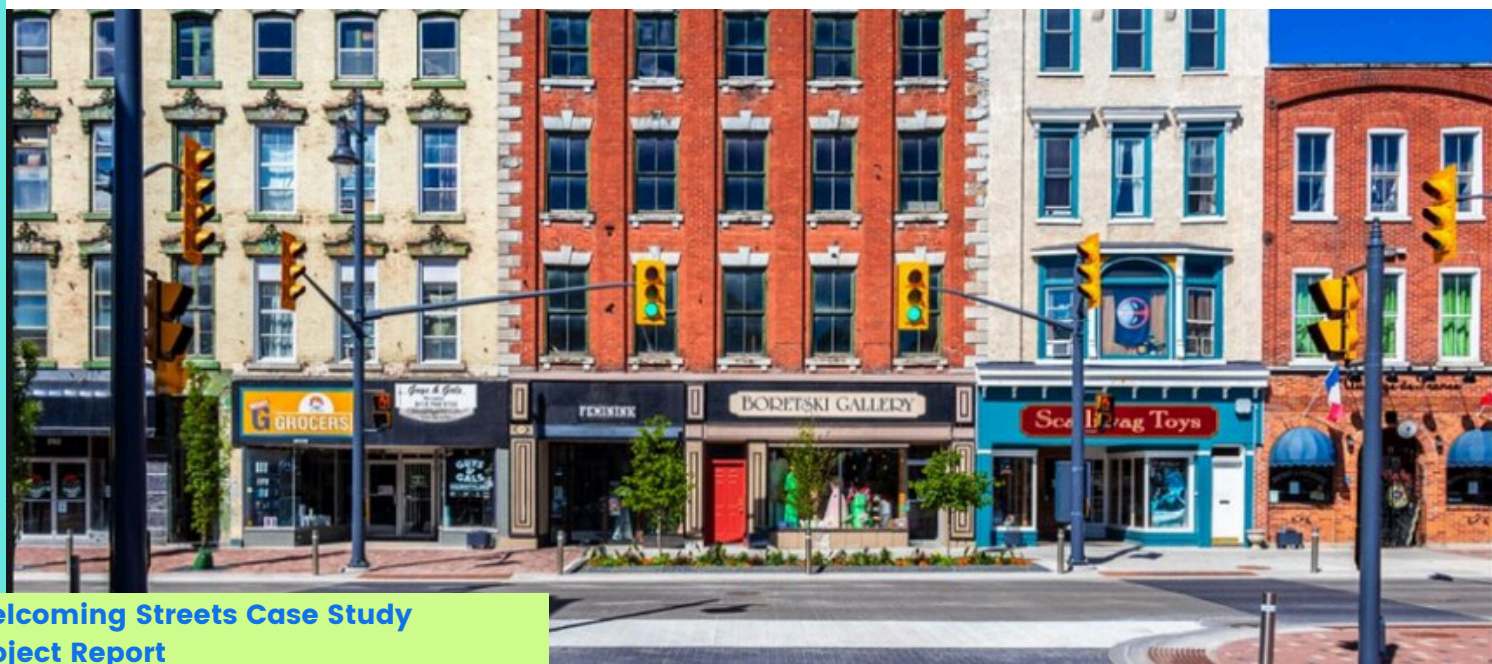
"People don't understand the amount of what happens when you're in that situation. You're adrenaline in your body… you're in a constant like state of alert. You don't sleep when you're sleeping…. you're under such copious amounts of stress… it's psychologically damaging … and that's why they, you know, try and take the different things to make it feel a little better because it's painful. It's very painful to do it sober….Like this is just gonna continue to be like a taboo subject that people are gonna continue to not be wanting to talk about because it's too, it's too hurtful to the people … between the two communities. It's not even a superior kind of thing. It's just basically who's the bully and who's being bullied and who's the, you know, who's the king of the hill? I guess like it's, you know, like these people are trying to just survive and other people are like alright, "time for you guys to move along and if you don't do as we say, we're gonna arrest you and beat you and make you feel like you were worth nothing". And they do. And so I mean I don't really know, existing is exhausting." (POLE 24, Sept. 25, 2024).

For Stakeholders, there is not the urgency of bodily integrity, however, there is the fear of their livelihoods being lost, and the concern of the survival of their businesses.

"On Monday morning we opened our business and discovered a group of homeless people had set up camp in a parking space in front of our business, spilling onto the sidewalk, patio, and blocking our apartment door. Of course no one would come in here seeing that, and anyone who did see it will never come back. We first called Welcoming Streets, who got here within 10 minutes, and immediately started to address the situation. After an hour with no movement, we called the police community office, who also came within 10 minutes. They had better results and waited until most of the people had gone. It took about four hours until resolved. Therefore, [I] lost half a day in potential business" (Business/Organization 10, Oct. 10, 2024).

The two narratives included capture the contrasting experiences but share the tone of loss, hardship and survival. It is not to state that the experiences are directly comparable but offer a narrative that describes two groups at odds, both trying to 'survive'.

Meeting Goals & Program Efficacy

Welcoming Streets' key service areas are: reducing unnecessary calls to the police, enhancing community safety, connecting unhoused persons to local housing and mental health/substance use supports, fostering positive therapeutic relationships, and raising awareness through community education. Participants were asked whether they saw these goals in action.
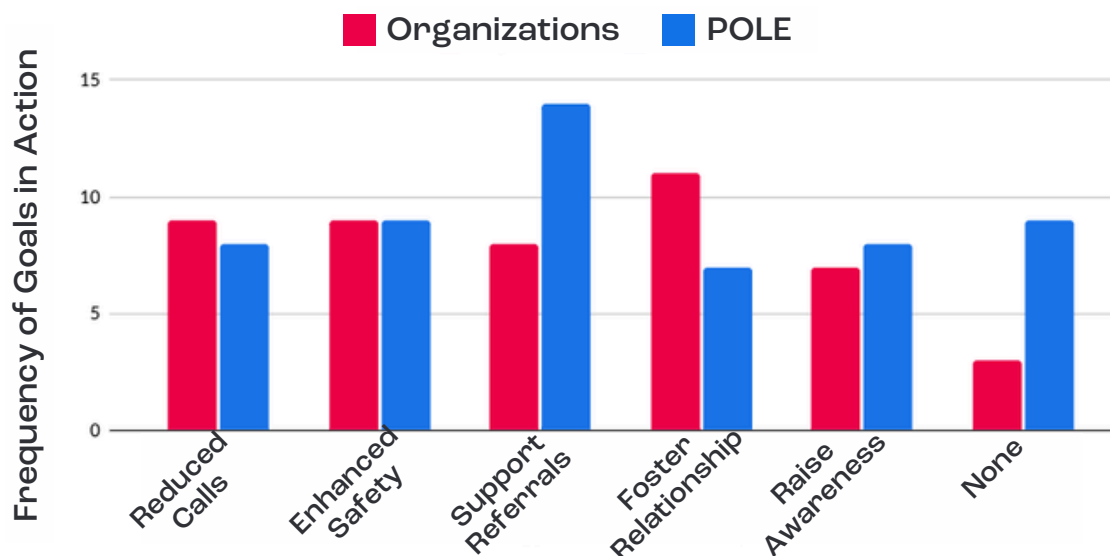
In general, participants believe that Belleville Welcoming Streets is meeting their goals. There is evidence to indicate all goals had been witnessed in action by many respondents, although some stakeholders from both groups indicated they had not witnessed any goals being reached. It is notable that POLE have witnessed a significantly higher number of referrals over those of the organizations, although this may not be surprising, considering people on the ground would have naturally seen more referrals to programs than those not needing referrals.

Additionally, participants were asked how effective they thought the Welcoming Streets Program has been in supporting individuals experiencing homelessness and addressing concerns identified by organizations and the public.
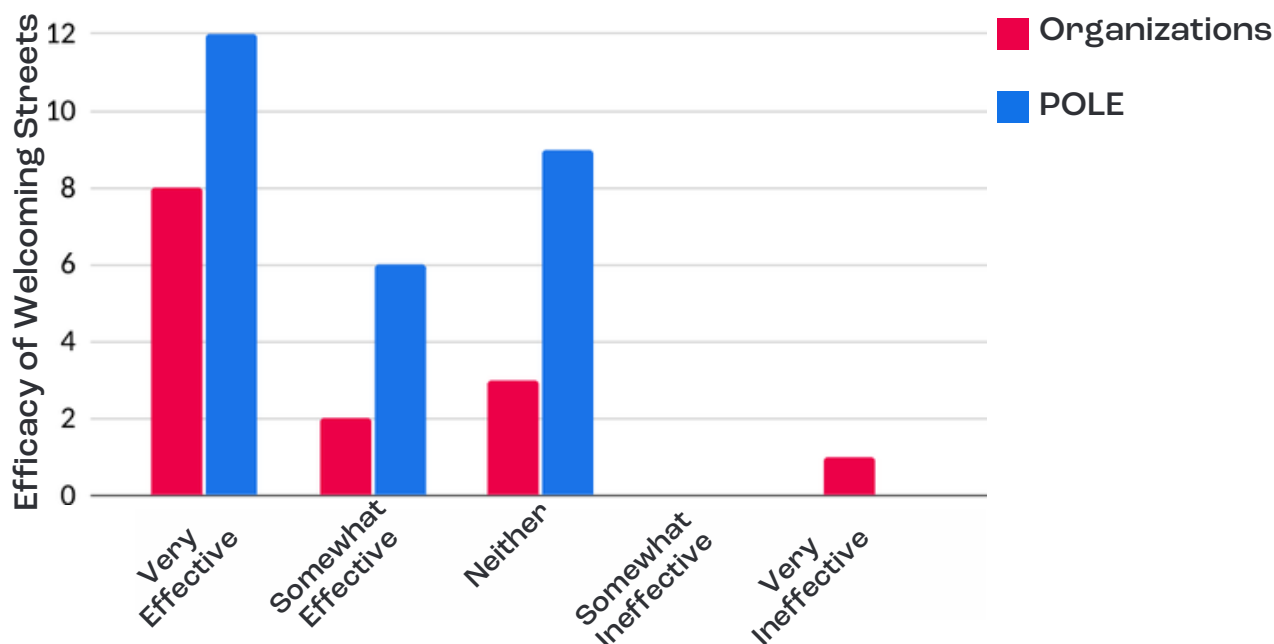
The highest percentage of feedback from respondents is that the program is either somewhat effective or very effective. There is a significant response of neither effective nor ineffective for both groups. There are limited responses that the program is ineffective. Overall, responses demonstrate a neutral to positive experience with the program.

An additional question at the end of each survey asking about the impact of Welcoming Streets Belleville yielded mixed reviews. We believe the following response provides context for this mixed review:

"I'd like to clarify that it's not because I don't think Welcoming Streets is having an impact. I very much believe Welcoming Streets is having a positive impact. However, given the increase in the demand for service due to the ongoing homelessness and substance use crisis, they simply can't keep up with this demand. Things seem to have gotten much worse in the downtown core since 2021, but that's not because of/due to Welcoming Streets. I would hate to see what the current state of things would be WITHOUT Welcoming Streets supporting the unhoused folks etc. and downtown businesses like they have been for the past three years. However, despite their best efforts and great work, things continue to worsen in the downtown core, but not because of Welcoming Streets" (Business/Organization 1, Sept. 23, 2024).

Available Services - Assets & Gaps

While Welcoming Streets acts as a liaison, a peacekeeper, and referral program, there are other assets and community services working to meet the needs of the unhoused population that resides downtown:

Housing, Shelter, & Drop In:
- Grace Inn Shelter
- Bridge Street United Church Drop-in
- Peer Support & Freedom Centre

Information & Resources
- Hastings Housing Resource Centre
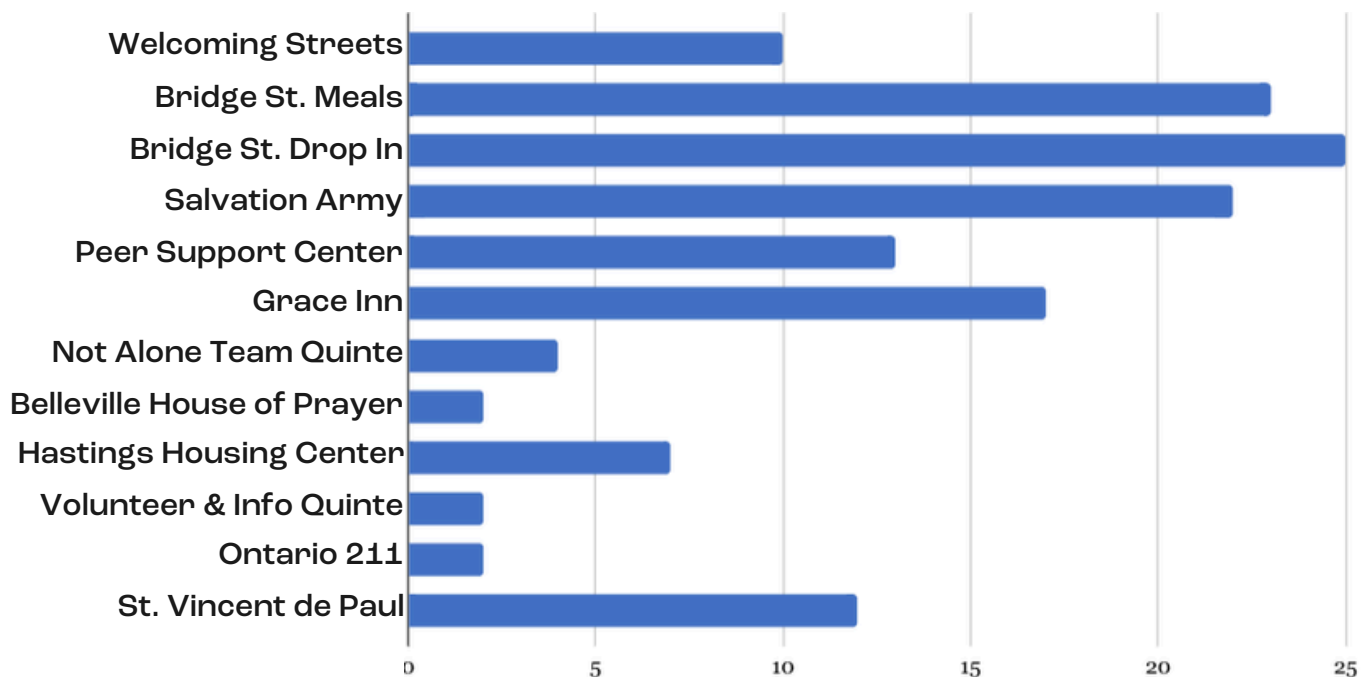- Volunteer and Information Quinte
- Ontario 211

Clothing & Material Needs
- St. Vincent de Paul
- Not Alone Team Quinte

Food & Meals:
- Bridge Street United Church Meals
- Salvation Army
- Not Alone Team Quinte

When asked what downtown services have been used by unhoused people, responses were as follows:

Total # of people using each service (out of 28)

When both groups of stakeholders were asked "what supports or services do you feel are missing in the downtown core?", results were as follows:

Common Concerns
- Public washrooms
- Affordable housing
- Grocery store

Persons with Lived Experience
- Shelter services
  - Including specific women's and trans-gendered services
- Safe spaces
- Counselling/mental health support

Community Partners and Business Owners
- Addiction services
  - Including harm reduction and safe injection sites
- More security to address blocking of homes and businesses

When asked what suggestions could be useful to fill these gaps, both groups referred to working together to improve infrastructure and finding creative ways to increase support and services. Education was also referred to as a core theme, with both parties stating that each other could learn more about the other's perspective and set of needs. Particularly, POLE highlighted their knowledge and ability to teach others in the community about the distinct needs and challenges of their lives and living situations.

Many of the identified gaps cannot be satisfied by Welcoming Streets, however, the organization could advocate for these needs, on behalf of the community. It could also work with the various downtown stakeholders to create communication tools that translate wants and needs across the various populations.

Best Practices: Feedback From Staff

Multiple focus groups with front-line staff were held to explore the day-to-day tasks and experiences of Welcoming Streets workers across communities. It was evident during the focus groups that the Welcoming Street's role is unique in each community but shares a commonality of tasks, delivery of services, program hopes and challenges. Practical and realistic recommendations for best practices emerged in this discussion, as well as a mutual desire to develop connections between programs and support one another in shared goals.

Training

When respondents were asked, "What training or support did you receive to prepare for your role?" most indicated that while they were given some training, more training would have been useful. Two of nine respondents indicated that they had little to no training at all: "There was no training ahead of this job, so I would say everything in my career life experience all added in to that pretty much" (Front Line Staff C, Oct. 16, 2024), "I was kinda thrown to the wolf, so to speak" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

When discussing what training should be offered, the list included:
- Non-violent crisis intervention/de-escalation
- ASSIST suicide prevention
- Motivational interviewing
- Naloxone training
- Harm reduction
- Mental Health First Aid

Additionally, front line staff indicated a desire for training in areas that will assist with community building and networking. This included skills such as how to run a meeting and how to best prepare and deliver a presentation. Staff indicated this role often required them to sit on committees, chair meetings, and make presentations to the community. They believed that training about community advocacy tools and how best to deliver public education would assist in their roles.

Resources to Support Welcoming Streets Staff

To explore the operational support required to make this program successful, respondents were asked "Do you feel you have the necessary resources (e.g., equipment, staff, information) were available to effectively carry out the outreach program?" While some program staff noted that their resource needs were well supported, others expressed significant gaps in resources to carry out their jobs well. While resource support varied from community to community, all participants expressed ideas about additional resources that they thought might be helpful.

Staffing Levels

Most respondents noted that staffing levels were key to doing the work. Some programs already run model whereby two staff are always on duty, however, there are programs where there is only one staff at a time. Two staff was stated to feel safer and more effective.

Staff turnover and job stability were also raised as a resource issue. "Staffing is always a challenge. A lot of our... outreach positions are contract based. Due to the nature of contract work, staff members are searching for other jobs while in position because they don't know if the funding will allow them to return to their jobs. When other stable jobs come up, they often move on" (Front Line Staff F, Oct. 11, 2024).

Program Supplies

Across all programs, regular provisions of food, snacks, water, warm clothing, hygiene supplies and tools, are offered as needed. Most programs also provide cigarettes - some through donation/program dollars and some informally through staff that are providing them out of pocket. Many noted that programs rely on donations to serve needs, which is often inconsistent and sometimes unreliable.

"Through our funding, we're able to purchase quite a bit of food and water supplies as well as hygiene products and supplies... the unstable part of that is we rely a lot on various people providing us with donations - whether it's in the form of clothing, camping equipment, miscellaneous tools, devices and such" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

Funding

The level of funding, or insecurity of funds, was addressed by many. Not only do staff feel insecure about the funding of their paid roles, the level of funding for materials to meet the needs of the job were also stated as not enough to rely on. Staff are expected to be creative in finding resources elsewhere. Without a budget for essential programs, the ability to offer what is needed presents a challenge to staff and programs.

Community Resources

Leveraging other community resources was seen as a key function of the job, therefore connections to community agencies and relationships with partners are integral to service. Some agencies can leverage internal referrals (i.e. from Community Health Centres and community-based programs) and access virtual supports when appropriate. When available, the use of the Homeless Individuals and Family Information Systems (HIFIS), was noted as a valuable tool. Only one organization leveraged this tool, but in discussions, it sounded like it may be something of interest to all. It was noted that leveraging community resources was successful when those resources existed, however, an overall lack of appropriate/available resources in some communities makes this a challenge.

All All front-line staff were proud of their ability to be flexible and creative to meet the needs of the communities they serve:

> "We are doing things that are outside of our role, but it's just wild to hear from everybody. So far in a few short minutes that I've been here, that we're all kind of… We're like firsthand seeing where the gaps are and where the needs are because we're meeting people where they are at on the front line," (Front Line Staff E, Oct. 16, 2024).

Adapting to Changing Community Needs

Front-line staff of various Welcoming Streets programs were asked: "How does the program adapt to changing community needs or feedback?"

All respondents consistently replied feedback was essential to program operations. Most respondents had a mechanism for soliciting feedback. The most common was community surveys. Some were a formal or informal feedback process when renewing contract with funders of the program. There was ample discussion about regularly solicited and unsolicited feedback from the community. Some communities are over-resourced and step back when appropriate, while some communities are under-resourced and Welcoming Streets workers need to provide creative support.

> "But there's one thing to give an individual some food or some water, or, you know, but being able to provide them with the services and that would be the successful adaptation. From feedback, there are other teams doing outreach at the time. You know, do we need to have five agencies who are all focused on the same area doing the same thing, no. So how can we create and change and flow with that?" (Front Line Staff F, Oct. 11, 2024).

> "Adapting to community needs is so integral to our operation that the act of doing so is very normalized and baked-in to how we operate. It starts with communication, with stakeholders and clients both sharing some of their observations during check-ins or meetings" (Front Line Staff I, Oct. 16, 2024).

Relationships with the Community & Partners

Front-line respondents were asked "What relationships do you maintain with stakeholders or partners? How do these relationships impact the program's success?"

Staff were quick to note that their relationships with businesses and city officials vary significantly from those with community service partners. Balancing the needs of business owners, city officials, emergency responders, community partners, while prioritizing the needs of the unhoused population is challenging, complicated, and difficult.

"The relationships impact our program success. It becomes difficult balancing the wants and the needs of particularly a lot of different business owners and counselors. And the vulnerable population and what they need and want in the moment" (Front Line Staff D, Oct. 16, 2024).

"We actually got asked by the city to go out with bylaw and move people and I found that one was a very difficult thing to navigate because they're our funders. And so it was finding that middle ground like, what is our role?" (Front Line Staff C , Oct. 16, 2024).

"Understanding and working effectively with community partners, such as fire and paramedic emergency service workers, would also be beneficial. I found that there's been quite a bit of stigma that comes from these workers and like maltreatment towards the population, which can be difficult to handle" (Front Line Staff B, Oct. 16, 2024).

Overall, there was positive feedback about working with agencies and community service partners and leveraging those relationships for service provision. Social service providers generally share a common goal and purpose with Welcoming Streets. They are there to provide service to persons who are unhoused.

> "As for partners, I think due to the nature of our program… we kind of exist within the gaps of some of the services and such. You know, we've got a quite a strong relationship with some of our community partners" (Front Line Staff A , Oct. 16, 2024).

A theme emerged in regard to the universality of interpersonal techniques that were required amongst various stakeholders of the downtown core. While the nature of the relationships and concerns were often different, all stakeholders required listening to, understanding and interpreting the perspectives of others, and problem solving brought mutual understanding and a re-stated course of action allowing mutual goals to be met.

> "The differences on a business-by-business case, you know, we talk about how every individual is unique, but I found I've almost started applying the same concepts and ideas and such as I would with a client to our businesses and almost managing or not managing them, but interact with them in the same idea, what are their needs?" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

Front-line staff learned from each other and piggy-backed on one anothers' answers:

> "I… applied a lot of similar strategies… Applying those strategies to the business side of things, meeting them where they're at, really hearing them out… it can be quite intriguing how like how much overlap is there" (Front Line Staff B, Oct. 16, 2024).

Front-line workers are keeping their own relationships and lists of resources:

> "we developed this like extra business roster to serve as like a checklist so we can keep track of like when we're meeting with people. The regularity of it. Like if anything, you know, very pertinent with discuss. So that way like we could prioritize businesses that we are sort of seeing a little bit less" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

Due to the fact that this program is primarily relationship based, when people leave other roles within the community (which is common in this line of work), it leaves a gap in service for Welcoming Streets ability to refer:

"When other programs change, when workers stop, like let's say there is an outreach worker for the shelter, and they quit and they don't fill the role. Nobody lets me know that. So, I'm just calling a number that nobody's answering" (Front Line Staff D, Oct. 16, 2024).

Rewarding Aspects of the Front-Line Role

To understand what motivates front-line workers in this role, they were asked "what do you find most rewarding about your role in the outreach program?"

Focus group participants responded that the rewarding aspects of the role included feelings of connection and relationship, collaboration, the people they encounter, the ability to offer help and seeing positive outcomes. This was a robust discussion where all participants articulated the satisfaction of helping and the strength of collaboration, and this is what kept them going.

"I find it's incredibly motivating to see people sort of recognize their own self-worth and take steps toward improving their lives, whether it's like directly or indirectly with our support from our support" (Front Line Staff I, Oct. 16, 2024).

Workers stay in these roles because they are connected to the people they serve and their hope in the prospects of community and support for a better life. They watch people grow, and the ability to support this growth is inherent in the ability to retain them in their roles.

General Feedback for Program Improvement

When asked "What suggestions do you have for improving the outreach program?", front-line workers referred to two streams of conversation. The first was in relation to improved support for the direct provision of services: access to quality food items for distribution, the necessity of seasonal supplies, and the necessity of petty cash. More than one front line staff indicated they have used personal money to meet client needs.

Quality Supplies

"We had jerky money at one point. Beef jerky. Everybody loved it. People said to me, 'you're the jerky guy'. And I was like 'yes, here it is, you know, 10 grams of protein. Eat it.' I had chicken jerky. I had Turkey jerky.... and then what happened to the jerky? 'Don't have any money. Sorry.' But like it goes a little further than the granola bars, you know, we've got all of this. If I could get my jerky money back, that would be great. But I probably never will. And that's like, that's the rough thing is, you know, when I apply for funding, they go, 'well you've got granola bars'. Well, OK. Granola bars... there's no protein in a granola bar" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

"One thing that I think would be very beneficial is some sort of like access to some sort of slush fund that we have or something... like some sort of money. One way we can expense things and later down the road we can do things, but I don't know how many times I've had to pay out of pocket for like a $70.00 coach for somebody or something like that" (Front Line Staff C, Oct. 16, 2024).

"To even begin like, well, you've heard it. What I would do if I could have another $200.00 in petty cash. What I could do if I had cab money, cigarette money?" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

Provision of Cigarettes

Most front-line staff indicate they find a way to provide cigarettes, and in some cases, they are able to achieve this through donations. Funding for cigarettes is requested as a required tool for the work, in relation to both connection-making and harm reduction.

> "Let's have a cigarette and sit and chill and yeah, I mean that buys you so much. It buys a person into it a little bit, especially when they don't trust you. You're just a face. So it's that's all it is. You're just a person walking up that potentially doesn't have anything to offer them, so that's a great tool to have...
> "It doesn't matter if you smoke or you don't smoke, but if you carry cigarettes, regardless of the fact that you're doing this work, it's extremely a helpful tool." (Front Line Staff C, Oct. 16, 2024).
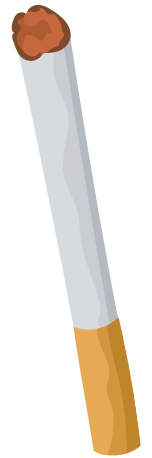
A Desire for Front Line Staff to Offer More Community Training

For unhoused populations, this could include outdoor survival training. For the entire community, this could include the provision of naloxone training.

Staffing & Supervision

An around the clock model was suggested. Perhaps, this could be a collaborative approach to supervision among various community partners.

> "So suggestions for improving it is that consistency - we have to look at doing more than a nine to five street outreach. It has to be. In a perfect world it would be 24/7... And having those that open dialogue and that open communication, I also think having management who has experienced the front line. And or if they don't have experience in front line, willing to go and walk the streets with the individuals... to better understand what they're doing" (Front Line Staff F, Oct. 11, 2024).

A Network of Welcoming Streets Staff Across Ontario

The desire for a network of Welcoming Streets staff in the province emerged in focus groups. The unique mandates of Welcoming Streets programs means the staff have experiences different from community partners. There was an immediate sense of comradery and common purpose that built during the focus group. A more formal connection to like programs would create a space for mutual support, program comparison and shared resources/ideas. There was an energy created with the sharing of common experience and front-line staff seemed appreciated the shared struggles and successes.

These excerpts highlight the sense of commonality in focus groups.

 "I think I've actually had that experience, and the one you guys were talking about earlier" (Front Line Staff C, Oct. 16, 2024).

"It's just wild to hear that this is a constant and different cities, different markets, if you will" (Front Line Staff E, Oct. 16, 2024).

 "Hearing similar stories as we've experienced" (Front Line Staff A, Oct. 16, 2024).

Discussion

Leveraging Commonalities of the Human Condition

An interesting takeaway from the research was the commonality in responses of all downtown stakeholders - whether unhoused or business owners/community partners. All stakeholders who inhabit the downtown core have a similar love for their community, as well as similar hopes and fears. They see a welcoming downtown as clean, safe, friendly and containing a vibrant culture with a variety of services. They consider unwelcoming attributes to be substance use, violence, feeling unsafe, and a lack of services and businesses.

The sense of feeling welcome and unwelcome does not appear to be determined by one's membership to business community, service organization, or those experiencing homelessness, but rather of the overall human experience. Regardless of social position, persons expressed a desire for interpersonal connection and an appealing physical environment, as well as a desire to feel safe, able to take care of themselves, and to not be judged.

Front-line staff also alluded to the commonality in addressing the homeless community and downtown business owners, as they shared how the de-escalation and support techniques they used were often the same, regardless of whether they were speaking to a business owner or an unhoused person.

As Welcoming Streets programs strive to improve the welcoming culture, they might consider engaging in public activities that shine a light on the common experience of the human condition. Alongside community partners, they might consider asking questions such as....

- How might the commonality of the human experience be captured and conveyed in educational and communications materials, in a way that will reduce stigma, offer perspective, and bridge gaps between various downtown stakeholders?

- What events and activities can bring people together that help recognize the common human experience, through shared interests that are not built upon class and economic status?

- How can the recurring theme of arts and culture be utilized as a tool for building community resilience?
  - Could this common interest be leveraged for bringing stakeholders together and deepening community connections?
  - Could this common interest be leveraged for creating a more welcoming, vibrant, and attractive community?

Building Trust & Creating Space for Unhoused Persons

Feedback from respondents noted a lack of "safe space" in the downtown core. This was described as "free" space that is either indoors or outdoors, where unhoused persons can simply exist without being asked to move along. These spaces were described in the stories from focus groups, and referred to extensively in the literature (i.e. Smith et al.'s "convivial spaces").

Simple things, like a place to sit, and more essential things, like access to fresh water and washroom facilities were reiterated as unaddressed necessities, suggested by respondents across stakeholder groups. All humans deserve dignity and respect, regardless of their situation. Although dignity was not identified as a theme, the concepts of safe and accessible space indicated a desire for all persons downtown to have equitable access to basic needs.

From front line staff, the ability to create trust and relationships can start with something as seemingly simple as offering a cigarette. It was discussed that the act of sharing smoke can work to de-escalate tense situations and can offer an inlet for relationship-building. Creating safe relationships can create safe spaces. A safe space can be physical, and sometimes it can be emotional. Giving time to create safe spaces whenever possible is central to the work of Welcoming Streets. Choosing an appropriate style of uniform for front line workers is an example of a choice that can facilitate safe space and welcomed interactions.

Building Healthy and Welcoming Cities

The goal of creating healthy and welcoming communities is linked to broader social, economic and political factors. From the lens of structural theories of social work, the most equitable solution to building healthy and welcoming cities is access to safe and affordable housing in combination with appropriate levels of income support, mental health, and addiction services for all. According to Mullaly and Dupre, the ideal social welfare state "seeks more than a national minimum for citizens attempting to achieve a general equality of living conditions" (45, 2007). In this model, programs and services are universal and easily accessible, and human needs are prioritized.

While basic human rights are recognized on paper by Canada, in the Canadian Human Rights Commission, and acts/policies such as the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act, workable solutions are yet to be enacted and many continue to suffer. To be overcome community needs must be addressed at all levels of government. Until that time, mitigating services, such as Welcoming Streets programs, will be required to keep the effects of these issues at bay.

While Welcoming Streets has become an important service to mitigate the effects of homelessness, it is not meant to be a solution to homelessness, addictions, or downtown disruptions. Possible solutions to the problems experienced downtown are increased affordable housing options and increased access to mental health and addictions services, including a safe injection site. In the meantime, funding programs like Welcoming Streets is an impactful alternative to preventing further harm from the effects of homelessness and a mental health crisis.

Recommendations

For All Welcoming Streets Programs

Service Delivery & Operations

- Maintain a focus on relationship and community-building as core purpose
- Continue to build strong relationships with community services and organizations; execute a regular practice of warm referrals
- Maintain up-to-date lists of community partners and staff contacts
- Create an easy process for contacting Welcoming Streets workers. Offer phone, text, or email and do not use extensions or multiple phone lines.
- Offer a flexible model of delivery, allowing for service to be provided on the terms of the person needing support
- Provide staff with a petty cash account that allows them to support emergency situations and provisions for basic needs
- Provide a budget line for cigarettes and allow staff to be able to regularly provide them
- When choosing uniforms, consult with the homeless population in your community to ensure they create a feeling of safety
- Ensure two staff are scheduled for every shift
- Establish and maintain mechanisms/practices for debrief and mutual support of front-line workers
- Create permanent positions to offer job stability and prevent frequent turn-over of staff
- Offer an annual feedback process that gives a voice to all community stakeholders, and thoughtfully implements solutions to feedback

Suggested Trainings for Front-Line Workers

- Trauma Informed Care and Mental Health First Aid
- Non-Violent Crisis Intervention/De-escalation
- ASIST: Applied Suicide Intervention Prevention Training
- Naloxone training and other harm reduction techniques
- Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) comprehension
- Community Advocacy comprehension & effective presentation skills
- Community meeting etiquette and protocols

For Welcoming Streets Belleville

- Secure stable funding sources
- Continue to expand the capacity to offer provisions for basic needs
- Continue to focus on inter-agency collaboration and relationships
- Increase public education about the program and its scope of services
- Possibly, circulate branded match boxes with program contact information
- Explore ways to leverage the knowledge and experience of the unhoused population to determine solutions that can serve community needs
- Consult the unhoused population of Belleville for feedback about current uniforms
- Create training videos for downtown businesses that are accessible and self-paced (i.e. trauma-informed communication, using Naloxone, anti-stigma)
- Advocate to the City of Belleville for infrastructure and basic services (including public washrooms, benches, water fountains)
- Create a network of Welcoming Streets front-line service providers across Ontario and meet on a regular basis to share information, support, resources, and ideas

For City of Belleville

- Increases public washrooms
- Introduce a safe injection site
- Increase housing and shelter spaces

For Future Research

- Investigate and develop tools and materials that Welcoming Streets can use for public education
- When it becomes operational, track the impact of the new Integrated Care Hub in relation to activity in the downtown core
- Investigate funding models for all Ontario Welcoming Streets programs towards consistent and stable funding across the province

Conclusions

The information gathered in consultation with people of lived experience with homelessness, businesses and community partners, and front-line staff, provided valuable insight into the local context of Belleville and its Welcoming Streets program, as well as revealing common trends and challenges for service delivery across the province. This research returned three primary conclusions:

1
All people, regardless of economic status, have a common perception about what is welcoming/unwelcoming and safe/unsafe and what makes for a thriving downtown core. This common experience of the human condition can be leveraged in communication and advocacy and the future work of Welcoming Streets. Programs and activities engaging in and celebrating arts and culture may be explored as an option for continuing to build community and bring people together.

2
To be effective, Welcoming Streets programs need to be flexible, creative, collaborative, and well resourced (with supplies and well-trained staff). The role of Welcoming Streets is predominantly to build strong relationships and must work together with other agencies to meet community needs. Due to the complexity of the role, front-line staff should be required to have a broad range of traits and skills and offered diverse ongoing training. Workers should carry cigarettes and have access to a petty cash fund for emergencies. The effectiveness of each individual program would be increased by regular networking, support, and knowledge-sharing amongst Welcoming Streets programs across the province.

3

To be sustainable, Welcoming Streets programs need to be securely funded. Due to the relational nature of the program, offering job security will aid in the recruitment and retention of qualified and appropriate candidates for these unique and important roles. Further investigations must be taken to explore a sustainable funding model that can support Welcoming Streets Belleville into the future.

Welcoming Streets programs are a novel adaptation to a unique need in downtown cores across Ontario. They are an effective and unique service for people who are unhoused and have the distinctive feature of working with local businesses. In communities across the province, Welcoming Streets programs are continuing to grow, duplicate, and evolve. This report intends to offer considerations of best practices to guide the development and evolution of new and established programs and assist in the ongoing growth of this important and impactful service.
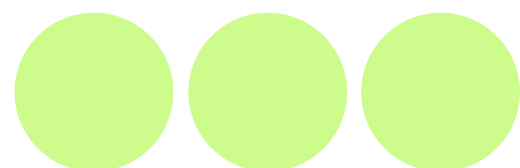
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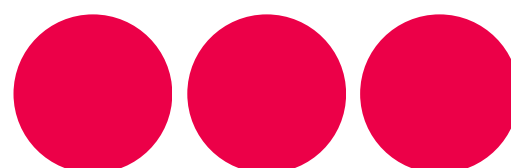
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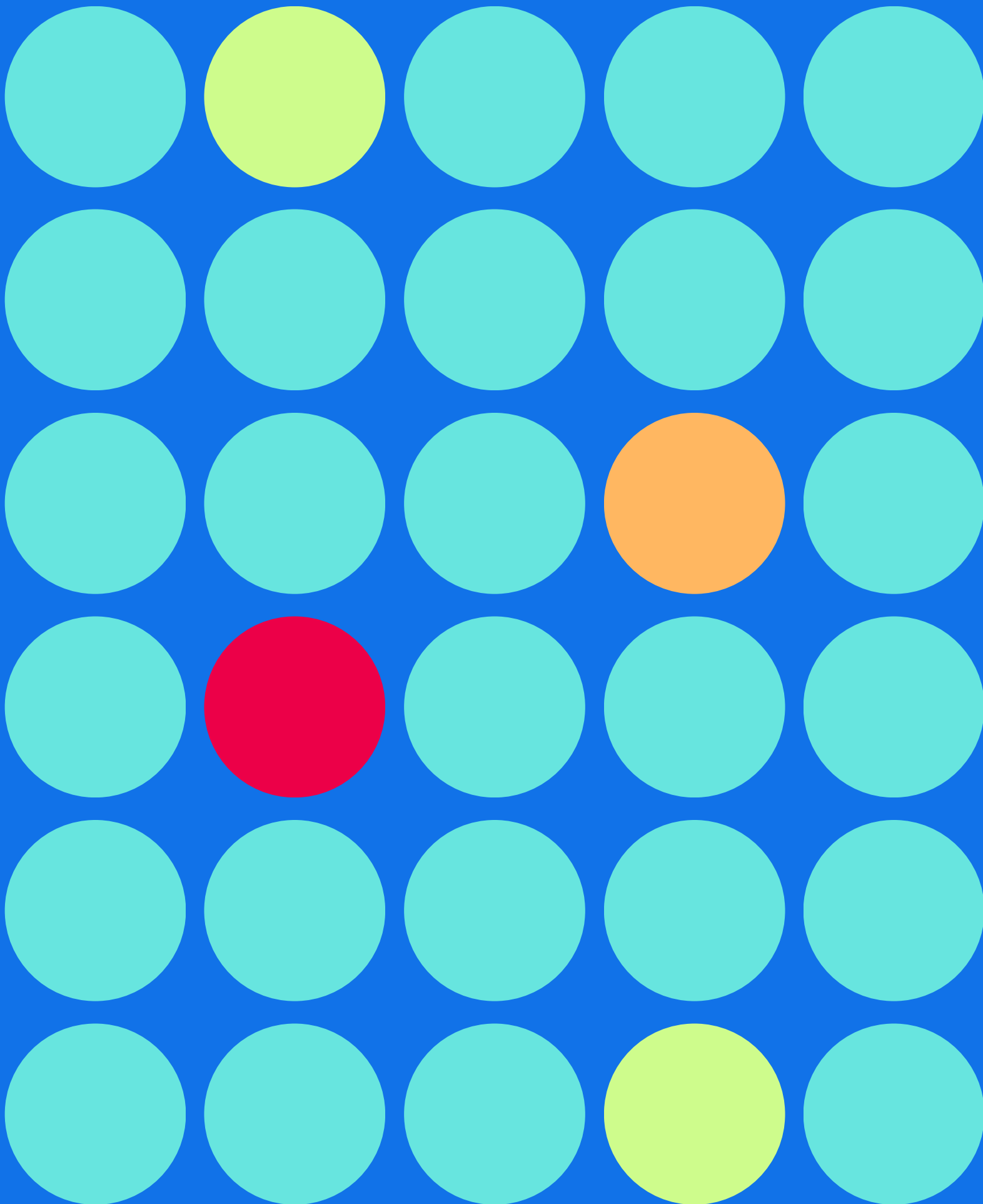
Project Metrics

Student Opportunities	**5**	4 Social Service Work Placement Students (2 Winter 2024, 1 Spring 2024, and 1 Fall 2024) 1 Student Research Associate, Centre for Healthy Communities
Faculty Positions	**1**	Principal Investigator (Social Service Work, School of Health, Human and Justice Studies)
Community Partnerships	**20**	14 local businesses and organizations and 6 Welcoming Streets Programs across Ontario
Community Members Engaged	**28**	People of lived experience with homelessness who participated in surveys and focus groups

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