



# Community Voices

**Submission to the  
Guelph Community Wellbeing Initiative**

July 2012

# An introduction.

Community Voices is a group of Guelph community members experiencing economic hardship. We meet regularly to share information and work together for solutions to poverty.

Community Voices developed out of a need recognized by members of the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination to increase the representation of people with lived experience of poverty. Community Voices was originally created as an advisory body to the Poverty Task Force (PTF). Its first meeting was in October 2010 and was founded by two members, with the support of the PTF Coordinator. As it found its 'voice' and clarified its purpose, a network evolved and now boasts a membership of approximately 20 community members.

In our very short time together, we have done the following: presented policy briefings in Guelph & Arthur during the 2010 municipal election, provided a public delegation to the City of Guelph regarding the need for an affordable transit pass program, and asked questions at the 2011 federal election candidates' debate. We also acted as an advisory body for the PTF Social Assistance Review Planning Committee and the PTF Do the Math campaign.

This report is based on a discussion with 8 members of Community Voices, facilitated by Maris Lush, PTF Assistant Coordinator, on June 28, 2012. This report is based on those discussions and was prepared on our behalf by Randalin Ellery, PTF Coordinator. The final report was approved by members of Community Voices on July 19, 2012.

**The views and statements in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination.**

# What 'wellbeing' means to us.

The term 'wellbeing' is new to many of us.

We hear lots of terms used to describe poverty and the issues and barriers faced by people living in poverty. Terms like 'capacity,' 'social capital,' 'economic hardship,' and 'prosperity.' These are **terms people use to talk *about us*, but not always with us.**

We want to be part of the conversation - especially one that is about our community - and so we appreciate the opportunity to tell you what wellbeing means to us.

Before we looked at how the Guelph Community Wellbeing Initiative (CWI) defines wellbeing, we talked about what 'wellbeing' means to us. Here is what we concluded:

**Wellbeing involves personal feelings.** These can be feelings of happiness or defeat, of being respected or listened to. It's hard to have a sense of wellbeing if you're dealing with very challenging issues in your life - which is a reality for many of us. Yet when those issues are resolved or something good happens, we feel better and our sense of wellbeing improves.

**Wellbeing involves basic needs.** Core needs like food and shelter, contribute to the wellbeing of an individual and a community. Since much of our daily life revolves around having our basic needs met, this aspect of wellbeing is the most important for us to consider.

**Wellbeing involves the neighbourhood and environment you live in.** Many of us have similar struggles, but the impact they have on our lives is different because of the neighbourhood we live in. For example, regularly accessing healthy and affordable food is something we all find a challenge. However, those with access to a neighbourhood community garden find it easier and as a result, have a better sense of wellbeing. Likewise, the environment around us can impact our wellbeing. Those who live near a park or green space may have a better sense of wellbeing than those who live next to a highway or high-rise.

# What we love about Guelph.

To start our discussion, we considered the first question Guelph CWI comment card - “what do you love about Guelph?” For some of us, this was a hard question to answer. More often than not, we’re asked questions about what we don’t like, what we’re missing, and what we need. To think positively was to think *differently* and it took a lot of encouragement from our facilitators before the conversation really started to flow.

## **Wellbeing involves personal feelings.**

For many of us, the first thing that came to mind when thinking about what we love about Guelph was the people we love - our friends and family. Having loved ones in the same city as us is one of the best parts about living here.

We also discussed how we love the sense of community we feel as residents of Guelph. This was difficult to put into words for us, but we know it is related to feeling supported by people in Guelph and having opportunities to get involved in our communities and neighbourhood groups.

## **Wellbeing involves basic needs.**

Since many of us struggle to have our basic needs met, it was hard for us to come with things we love about Guelph that support this aspect of wellbeing. We did, however, talk about the number of recreational opportunities that are provided for our children, including neighbourhood group summer camps and free splash pads.

Some of us did note that part of what we love about Guelph is the number of support services offered to help us meet our basic needs.

Many of us deal with health issues and quite a number of us reflected on health care services as something we love about Guelph. All of us have a family doctor and have used health services offered by the Guelph Community Health Centre and Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health.

## **Wellbeing involves the neighbourhood and environment you live in.**

Many of the things we identified as part of what we love about Guelph are related to the environment we live in. We love Guelph’s green spaces and parks, the clean air, the community gardens, and the community centres like the Shelldale Centre.

We also love the number of community groups, like the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and Community Voices, which give us a platform to have our voices heard and included.

We love community leaders in Guelph, like MP Frank Valeriote, City Councillor June Hofland, and the Director of Ontario Works, Stuart Beumer. These are people we feel listen to our concerns and advocate for change.

We love the number of volunteers in our community and the supports and services they provide and we love that there are opportunities for us to volunteer in a meaningful way.

Finally, we love the diversity of our neighbourhoods. We love how people in Guelph can come together, regardless of their cultural, spiritual, or financial background, to work together for a better community and to celebrate our city.

# What we don't love about Guelph.

We know that the Guelph CWI comment card didn't ask us to talk about this specifically, but it was hard for us not to acknowledge what we *don't* love about Guelph when talking about what we do.

## **Wellbeing involves personal feelings.**

How we are treated by others impacts our sense of wellbeing and when we are treated badly or not listened to, our wellbeing is negatively impacted. Some of us noted that part of what we don't love about Guelph is how we are treated by front line staff at organizations meant to support us. We feel that more training would help improve this. We also shared a sense that City of Guelph staff members don't understand the issues we deal with or participate in community groups that might increase their understanding or awareness.

## **Wellbeing involves basic needs.**

Many of us struggle to meet our basic needs and feel that some of the challenges we face are specific to Guelph.

We all agreed that there is not enough housing in Guelph that is safe, adequate, accessible and affordable.

Similarly, we all agreed that there are major issues with how emergency food services are delivered. Many of us have had negative experiences using the services of the Guelph Food Bank and have been turned away because we are not "eligible" and/or have received unhealthy, expired food.

We also agreed that there are not enough good jobs in Guelph. More specifically, there is not enough jobs that pay a decent wage, include benefits, and are full-time (not contract).

Finally, while we identified health services as something we love about Guelph, we all agreed that one area of health services in Guelph we don't like is the availability of no- or low-cost dental care.

## **Wellbeing involves the neighbourhood and environment you live in.**

While many of us feel that our neighbourhoods are well-connected and contribute to our wellbeing, we don't always feel connected among different neighbourhoods. This is the result of two barriers in Guelph's environment - the Speed River and the Hanlon Parkway. Both the river and the highway separate neighbourhoods and the people in them and this is something we don't like about Guelph.

# What would improve our wellbeing.



The picture above is of the notes we took on the whiteboard during our discussion. On the left side, we wrote what we love about Guelph, and on the right side, what we don't love about Guelph. From this list, we each took a turn and talked about the one thing we felt would improve our wellbeing as individuals (pink sticky notes) and the one thing we felt would improve wellbeing in our neighbourhoods (blue sticky notes).

## What would improve our individual wellbeing.

- More community leaders that listen to the voices of people living in poverty and advocate for change.
- More long-term funding for programs (such as those offered through the Shelldale Centre) so they can be reliable and we don't have to worry that they'll disappear.
- More affordable education opportunities for adults.
- No- and low-cost dental supports, including preventative care, for children and adults.
- More safe, adequate, accessible and affordable housing.
- More training for front-line workers to increase empathy and customer service.
- Better access to emergency food services.
- More job opportunities that are permanent, well-paying, and provide benefits.

**What would improve wellbeing in our neighbourhood.**

- A stronger sense of community.
- More no- and low-cost recreational opportunities.
- No- and low-cost dental supports, including preventative care, for children and adults.
- More safe, adequate, accessible and affordable housing.
- A transit system that is dependable, accessible, and affordable.
- Better access to emergency food services.
- More job opportunities that are permanent, well-paying, and provide benefits.



# The actions we can take.

Thinking about actions we can take to improve wellbeing in Guelph was hard. Many of us don't feel like we have much to give - time and money are both limited. However, we did manage to think of a few ways that we can improve wellbeing (the yellow sticky notes).

- We can volunteer in our neighbourhood and in the broader community (such as at the Shelldale Centre).
- We can contribute to community gardens.
- We can support and care for our family members.
- We can help front-line workers gain a better understanding of our struggles.

