

North Hamilton Community Health Centre Reaches Out

This story describes a community-based initiative designed by members and groups affiliated with the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR), a Vibrant Communities convener organization. There are more than 150 such initiatives linked to the Roundtable. HRPR is a cross-sectoral community problem-solving table with a strategic focus on poverty and the aspiration of “making Hamilton the best place to raise a child.”

Recognizing need

Bordered by railway tracks and major arterial roads, North Hamilton’s Keith neighbourhood includes a mix of residential properties and heavy industrial enterprises. Keith household incomes average \$17,017 – \$11,000 less than the \$28,416 average income for other Hamilton residents. There are 43 percent low-income households in the neighbourhood, compared to the city average of 16 percent [Statistics Canada 2006]. The unemployment rate in Keith is nearly 11 percent; in the rest of the city, the rate stands at six percent. Despite economic difficulties, Keith residents are proud of their traditions of mutual support and resilience.

Unfortunately for its residents, Keith has very few services – no banks, grocery stores or libraries. But in 1987, the North Hamilton Community Health Centre (NHCHC) opened as the area’s primary health care facility. Before that time, only one family physician practised in North Hamilton. In the 20 years since its opening, the Centre’s staff has grown from 15 to 53 members and its services now include primary and secondary health care (e.g., occupational and physical therapy), health promotion and community outreach, immigrant and refugee outreach, chronic disease management and social work.

Health Centre administrators recently studied client postal code data and realized that only two percent of their clients came from Keith even though it comprises about 40 percent of North Hamilton. Railway tracks, heavy truck traffic and industrial sites make the two kilometre walk from Keith difficult and unpleasant, particularly in winter. Despite the availability of free bus tickets, Keith residents were staying away. Besides the transportation issue, they were distrustful of new programs. They were also concerned

that, once again, a service would be established in their neighbourhood and then disappear. Fortunately, the Health Centre's work to develop community gardens, begun in 2000, helped dispel concerns over sustainability.

People and partnerships

The 2004 closure of the Robert Land School in the Keith neighbourhood became a catalyst for local action. The facility had developed into a community services hub, but with the school's closure, many of the programs it housed were moved to other neighbourhoods or disappeared altogether. The Robert Land Community Association secured financial support from Mohawk College, YMCA, Hamilton Community Foundation, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Rotary Club of Hamilton, Inner-City Outreach Ministry, and corporate and individual donors to transform the school into the Eva Rothwell Resource Centre at Robert Land. Partnerships with residents, neighbourhood associations and the YMCA now provide community programming for hundreds of children, youth, parents and seniors.

In the summer of 2007, staff at the North Hamilton Community Health Centre became interested in setting up a satellite clinic at the Eva Rothwell Resource Centre. They conducted a resident issues identification survey and a needs assessment, gathering information from approximately 40 people. They discovered that residents were concerned about economic stability, the neighbourhood's lack of services and transportation, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and theft. When asked what the Health Centre could do to help, the community suggested it find ways to provide medical care, birth control, prenatal and parenting care, HIV testing, laboratory services, mentoring programs, breakfast programs and teen support.

In the fall of 2007, renovations began on two classrooms at the Eva Rothwell Resource Centre to prepare for the installation of the health centre's satellite office. This work was done in partnership with the Threshold School of Building, a nonprofit learning centre that teaches construction, mechanical trade and life skills (www.thresholdschool.ca). One of the unexpected outcomes of this partnership was that the school's manager arranged for Health Centre staff to provide her students with access to a dietitian and officer manager to help them learn about proper nutrition and budgeting. Though the renovations took longer than had they been completed by a traditional contractor, the young employees gained marketable skills and were an integral part of a community development project.

By winter 2008, the classrooms were transformed into a reception area, clinical examination rooms, a therapist room, an office for visiting clinicians, a community room and a washroom.

Children and teen health promotion programs are now being offered free of charge at the satellite clinic. A Healthy Kids Club operates twice a month, allowing school-aged children the chance to prepare healthy meals and snacks. Leader Corps – a weekly youth program run in partnership with the YMCA – offers leadership, health and personal development activities. In the summer of 2008, the Health Centre and Eva Rothwell Resource Centre staff members developed a Future Leaders program. Participants were

provided leadership skills training, workshops from community leaders and an opportunity to apply their new leadership skills during a two-week summer day camp session.

Community Health Promotion Programs now operate at various times to meet community needs. The satellite clinic's primary care and advocacy services are open on Wednesday afternoons and Friday mornings. A nurse practitioner is available to see Health Clinic clients twice a week. Each clinic time slot is geared to a specific issue, including women's, child, sexual and teen health, and childhood immunization. A client advocate is available two half-days per week to provide assistance with housing issues, landlord and tenant issues, government services, access to local health and social services, financial assistance and legal issues. All residents of the Keith neighbourhood are eligible to receive care, whether they have a family physician or not.

Six months after its official opening, Health Centre staff anticipate that the satellite location at Eva Rothwell will quickly become an integral part of the neighbourhood, bringing together vital services and people. The web of support that made possible this project speaks to Hamilton's organizational strength and community commitment to the aspirational goal of "Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child."

Anne Makhoul and Kathy Allan-Fleet

Kathy Allan-Fleet is the Community Health Promotion Manager at the North Hamilton Community Health Centre. She can be reached at (905) 523-6611, extension 308.

Reference

Statistics Canada. (2006). *Census tract profile*. <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/profiles/ct/>

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1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org