January 2015

Our Voice

Vulnerable Populations

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Introduction

As a network of over 100 community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies from communities large and small across Ontario, Community Literacy of Ontario's goal is to provide relevant, timely information to our members on important issues related to adult literacy programming.

One of the top challenges for our members is how to access resources and strategies to support hard-to-serve learners on the Employment goal path. In response to a recent member survey, to which we received 50 responses from our members, Community Literacy of Ontario has learned that 100% of those respondents have clients on the Employment goal path. Many programs have identified an increase in the number of vulnerable or hard-to-serve learners who are seeking adult literacy programming. The Government of Ontario has also made vulnerable learners a priority. In its 2014-2015 call for Service Delivery Network Development Fund (SDNDF) Projects, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) was looking for:

Targeted initiatives to improve service providers' capacity to assist vulnerable populations and groups underrepresented in the labour market to:

- Complete and progress in the employment goal path; and/or
- Prepare for, obtain and maintain employment

What does it mean to be vulnerable?

Probably every adult literacy program in Ontario would say, if asked, that they serve vulnerable clients, but the definition of vulnerable varies considerably. This variability begs the question: How are vulnerable or hard-to-serve clients defined according to adult literacy programs in Ontario? If a program were to focus on serving vulnerable clients, how would they know if they had done so successfully?

If the staff in your agency have never sat down and defined what it means to serve vulnerable or hard-to-serve clients, it may be time that they did!

Vulnerable Populations

"*Groups underrepresented in the labour market*" are well defined by the federal government as: women, persons with disabilities, aboriginal people, and members of visible minority groups. Source: www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/jobs/ei/reports/mar2011/chapter4.shtml

However, to truly determine how, as a community-based literacy program, you can focus more on the needs of vulnerable or hard-to-serve clients, we need more specific references. Three interesting sources to compare and contrast are the *Canadian Index of Wellbeing*, the *Social Determinants of Health* and, of course, *EOIS-CaMS*. The chart below shows the characteristics or dimensions that each considers.

Canadian Index of Wellbeing	Social Determinants of Health	EOIS-CaMS
Education	Stress	Less than Grade 12
Living Standards	Income and Income Distribution	OW/ODSP No Source of Income Crown Ward
Community Vitality	Education	More than 6 Years out of School
Democratic Engagement	Employment and Working Conditions	More than 6 Years Without Training
Healthy Populations	Early Childhood Development	Age over 46 and under 64
Time Use	Food Insecurity	History of Interrupted Education
Leisure and Culture	Housing	Disabled
Environment	Social Exclusion	Aboriginal
	Social Safety Net	Deaf
	Aboriginal Status	Francophone
	Gender	
	Race	
	Disability	

- Source: Canadian Index of Wellbeing: https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/
- Source: The Social Determinants of Health: www.thecanadianfacts.org/the_canadian_facts.pdf
- Source: LBS EOIS-CaMS Suitability Indicators: www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/eotransformation/cams_reporting/eois-cams_reporting_lbs_dsq.pdf

What the above chart shows is that education plays a primary role in all three assessments of health and wellbeing, or, by contrast, vulnerability. In addition, community-based literacy practitioners will also identify with other factors that affect learners in their programs – stress, income and income distribution (poverty), food insecurity, social exclusion, etc.

Employers – an important piece of the puzzle

A key role for, and expectation of, community-based literacy programs is that they will help to transition learners with employment goals to employment. A critical ingredient in this scenario is the willingness of employers to hire learners from our programs – not always a simple thing to facilitate, given that some learners have multiple barriers. Ontario's community-based programs are resilient and creative though, and have begun to develop some best practices around connecting with employers.

Many agencies take advantage of community meetings, stakeholder meetings, employer information sessions, and they create opportunities to meet with employers by setting up face-to-face meetings with employers to gather first-hand information on what employers are looking for in their employees and to ensure that literacy program students are ready for the jobs that are available.

Yet other community-based literacy agencies are linking with employers to:

- Prepare apprentices to take the Certificate of Qualifications to complete their apprenticeship
- Provide fee-for-service computer instruction and other workforce training courses
- Arrange placements for youth employment programming
- Do intakes at employer sites
- Look for co-op placement opportunities

From a programming perspective, some literacy agencies are working with employers to:

- Run a variety of employment preparation programs
- Invite employer input to curriculum
- Offer services to companies going through closures and large lay-offs

Employers – not always easy to engage

While employers are undoubtedly an important part of preparing literacy students for success in employment, getting employer feedback and buy-in is easier said than done. Through CLO's 2014 member survey, we learned that our member agencies have several challenges linking with employers.

Often, employers are simply not receptive to community-based literacy agencies. Our members have noted that employers:

- Are busy
- Are not very familiar with Literacy and Basic Skills or with Essential Skills
- Have misconceptions about what will be expected of them
- Are unrealistic in their expectations of adult literacy programs (e.g., expecting progress at too rapid a pace)
- Feel they can't afford to participate because they do not understand the benefits of working with adult literacy agencies

Even when employers are open to be contacted, other challenges can surface such as:

- A lack of time for literacy program staff to connect, establish relationships and follow-up with employers
- Community-based literacy practitioners not being well versed in employer language (the language of return on Investment, productivity, etc.)
- Other programs competing to get employer time and resources – such as Employment Services
- Convincing employers to hire clients with lower levels of skills or with multiple barriers

What is the connection between hard-to-serve clients and Ontario Works/ Ontario Disability Support Program?

It would not be accurate to suggest that all learners who on Ontario Works or ODSP who attend community-based literacy programs are hard to serve. However, we know from our earlier comparison that the majority of learners on OW or ODSP are dealing with low levels of income, stress, food insecurity, and/or other issues in addition to low levels of education, making them more vulnerable or harder to serve. We also know that Ontario's community-based literacy agencies serve considerable numbers of OW/ODSP clients. In fact, 100% of those agencies who responded to our survey work with Ontario Works clients, and 95% of those agencies also work with ODSP clients. Approximately 40% of all community-based adult literacy clients self-identify as being on either Ontario Works or on ODSP.

Challenges in working with OW and ODSP clients

OW and ODSP clients can be difficult to serve because they, themselves, are experiencing several other stressors or impacts, including:

- being told they have to participate in an LBS program
- not feeling valued by the system
- lack of stability
- behavioural issues
- chronic lack of money
- food and housing instability
- low self-esteem and levels of motivation

CLO's members have identified several challenges in working with OW/ODSP clients, including:

- the extra time it takes to work with learners' other life issues/challenges, such as mental health, poverty, and substance abuse, along with:
- lack of student commitment to the program
- OW/ODSP requirements (e.g., shortest route to employment)

Sometimes, the challenges appear to stem from misunderstandings or pre-conceived notions held by OW/ODSP staff, such as:

- lack of caseworker buy-in/referrals to adult literacy
- lack of literacy screening/assessment
- unrealistic expectations of learner progress by caseworkers
- caseworkers not acknowledging or understanding the importance of literacy and Essential Skills
- high staff turnover in OW/ODSP offices – it can be hard to keep staff aware of LBS programs

Vulnerable Populations

Successful strategies for working with OW/ODSP clients

Community-based literacy agencies don't let challenges stand in their way of serving clients effectively. When we asked our members what strategies they use to increase the likelihood of success for OW/ODSP clients, they came up with a long list that we have divided into communication, referrals, and program changes/incentives.

Communication

Best practices related to communication include:

- Work closely with case workers
- Use texting for communication with clients
- Role modelling to clients
- Resolve personal conflict and stress
- Enforce client ownership and accountability
- Take the time to build relationships
- Be patient
- Lay out clear expectations right from the start of the program
- Provide consistent feedback

Referrals

In terms of making strong referrals to support OW/ODSP clients, our members offered these strategies:

- Identify appropriate programs/wrap-around services
- Implement a high level of case management and develop a case plan with ongoing follow-up
- Be an advocate

Program changes/incentives

Programs have demonstrated true client-centredness by altering programming to:

- Make program schedules more flexible
- Meet basic needs first
- Establish a sense of belonging
- Offer refreshments
- Create short-term goals
- Offer sessions on self-esteem
- Keep materials geared toward clients' interests
- Adjust hours to suit clients (e.g., starting later)
- Offer incentives (e.g., pot luck lunches, outings)
- Educate literacy practitioners about barriers related to poverty, mental health, and addiction
- Offer placements
- Make contacts/registrations for next steps (other programs, Employment Services)

Vulnerable Populations

From defining vulnerable clients to working with them

Ontario's community-based programs have, of course, been serving vulnerable clients since their program doors first opened. So what's changed? What's changed is that we have moved from a funding and a Performance Management system that took a practitioner's word that vulnerable and hard-to-serve clients' needs were being addressed to a much more structured and numerically-based system of accounting. With this change comes not just a need to be more specific and targeted in how we define vulnerable and hard-to-serve clients, but also a greater emphasis on case management, a greater need to connect with community partners and other community initiatives, and the need to continually redesign and examine the content of our programming. That sounds like a lot of work. It doesn't make sense for every program to reinvent the wheel. So, CLO will do what we do best: share our resources, experiences and approaches with each other so that we all may benefit.

Poverty – the obvious connection

When working with vulnerable clients, it's essential to consider what it means to be living in poverty. Ontario's community-based literacy agencies are going beyond acknowledging that many of our clients are living on or below the poverty line (because we've always been good at that) to making conscientious and strategic decisions to assist clients in moving out of poverty.

Tri-County Literacy Network

The Tri-County Literacy Network (serving Essex, Lambton and Kent Counties) has done a substantial amount of work around literacy and poverty, including their Linking Adult Literacy to Poverty Reduction Project. You can find out more information about this project and the tools that were developed through it ,here: http://tcln.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/report.pdf. Look for additional work around literacy and poverty reduction by the Tri-County Literacy Network through the Learning Networks of Ontario - www.learningnetworks.ca/Files/LLSC-LMP/Strategy%206%20Final.pdf , including their newest webinar on poverty and literacy!

Project Ontario Works (POW)

Literacy Link Niagara has also done some considerable work around examining how to best connect with Ontario Works offices and with Ontario Works clients. Their Project Ontario Works (POW) Project and its associated products have been, and will continue to be, very useful to adult literacy agencies.

The POW project resulted in these products, which can be found here: www.literacylinkniagara.ca/about-us/projects/project-ontario-works-pow/

- Best Practices Guide
- Final Report
- Sensitive Language Tip Sheet
- POW Quick-Screen

Bridges Out of Poverty

One way that some community-based literacy agencies are looking to further understand poverty and how it may affect clients is by reviewing training and resources stemming from research by Dr. Ruby Payne in her book called Bridges Out of Poverty.

Bridges Out of Poverty has three elements:

- The Bridges Out of Poverty model and associated workshops/training
- Getting Ahead Workshops which encourage people to explore the impact of poverty in their own lives, and to learn how to use the hidden rules of class to function effectively in the middle class world of education and employment
- Circles™ which is about supportive, intentional, reciprocal, befriending relationships comprised of a Circle Leader, a family working to get out of poverty, and two to four community allies, middle class people who are willing to befriend the family and support their way out of poverty.

Coordination and partnership development

At a regional level:

The Western Region Adult Literacy Networks have been fortunate to have had two years' worth of Labour Market Partnership (LMP) funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to research how to "coordinate services to better meet the needs of marginalized clients." It has been observed through these projects that clients on Ontario Works often find themselves in a position of marginalization. If you visit the Learning Networks of Ontario page and look under Publications and then Literacy Link South Central, you will find information on Phase 1 (which had 10 strategies) and Phase 2 (which had 7 strategies). You will find project reports, tools and resources, which we hope you will find useful in working with vulnerable learners. Through these two projects, four webinars were developed and delivered. The webinars can also be accessed through the Learning Networks of Ontario site at: www.learningnetworks.ca/.

At a program level:

Increasingly, Ontario's literacy programs are linking with other programs to better serve the needs of clients. In some cases, these programs are actually co-locating with Employment Programs, having conversations over the "cubicle" fences to talk about client needs and to suggest program content.

Other programs are not co-locating physically and permanently, but are offering services together out of one location.

For example, the Gateway to Learning Program (out of the Thames Valley District School Board) is working on a partnership with a local youth organization that services high numbers of Ontario Works clients. The young OW clients attend Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) and access YOU's GED preparation program. YOU has identified that it would like to increase the number of youth who actually complete the GED preparation program. Gateway to Learning can offer some very innovative modules that integrate technology and gamification principles at the YOU site, to give the young students a chance to take a break from the more academic preparation involved in the GED. The hope is that youth will stay engaged long enough to complete their GED. The Gateway to Learning program has taken the additional step of articulating the technology/gamification modules to the GED – to reassure the youth who are preparing for their GED that they are not taking a step backwards. By taking the new modules, they are still honing skills they will need for the GED!

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OUR FUNDER

Summary

Clients are coming to Ontario's community-based adult literacy agencies with increasing numbers of challenges, creating a strain on already strained resources. The only way we can continue to provide the high quality service that is associated with our sector is by being innovative and working in collaboration with other programs and services in our community. We hope that this newsletter has given you some validation for the wonderful work you do, as well as some ideas for new information you can research, new partnerships you can explore and new ways you can modify or adapt your programming.

At CLO, we are confident that our community-based literacy colleagues will continue to work tirelessly to meet the needs of all Ontarians – including those who are most vulnerable.

ACCESSING OUR NEWSLETTER ONLINE

Please share this newsletter with interested stakeholders. It is available online at:
www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/resources/e-communiques/