

Opportunities Waterloo Region: Ensuring Access to Recreation

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other community-focused organizations.

Challenge

Recreation is recognized as having a beneficial impact on physical and mental health, and positive youth development. Research has shown that if young people participate in activities which engage them, they will be more likely to stay in school and less likely to become involved in anti-social behaviours – crime, drug addiction and gang activity [Browne 2002; Wells and Arthur-Banning 2008].

Stimulated by the concerns of a determined self-organized local citizens group, an Opportunities Waterloo Region board member made a strong case in March 2006 to the Opportunities' Leadership Roundtable that access to recreation for children and youth should become part of its long-term, multisectoral work on poverty reduction.

Strategy

In September 2006, Waterloo Opportunities Region held a Community Conversation¹ on the issue of providing access to recreation for all youth. One of the key learnings from the event was that participants wanted to know about the recreation and leisure opportunities in the Region's three municipalities and four townships. Getting up-to-date, Region-wide program information was time-consuming and difficult.

Opportunities established the Access to Recreation for All Youth (A-RAY) working group and secured funding from the Ministry of Culture's Communities in Action Fund. Researcher and project lead Peggy Weston was hired to collect information about the Region's existing recreational activities. In September 2008, Opportunities published a report entitled "Access to Recreation for all Youth in Waterloo Region: Environmental Scan of Recreation and Leisure Opportunity for Youth" [Weston 2008].

With funding from the L.S. Hallman Foundation and in partnership with the Computer Systems Group of the University of Waterloo, Opportunities used the recreational data to develop an on-line resource directory of play, leisure and sports recreation facilities, activities and related groups (www.playscapewr.ca). Funds were also used to support further development of the partnerships network that had been created among municipal and regional recreation representatives during the data collection portion of the project.

Impact/Outcomes

Opportunities Waterloo Region provided the collaborative know-how and web space in which to create the recreational database project, but it now needs to locate an organizational host that can assume responsibility for maintaining and expanding the Playscape website. Further improvements (e.g., listing low- and no-cost recreational programs) and analyzing data in order to detail barriers to participation (e.g., transportation, cultural appropriateness, access for people with disabilities, location) are two areas that require attention.

Though creating the recreation map and network were time consuming, Opportunities achieved results that were seen as significant and enduring by a wide-ranging group of organizations. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Kitchener-Waterloo and the regional police had established recreational activities for at-risk youth, and they are now adding their voices to the discussion. Municipal and regional officials strongly supported the project from the outset and worked closely with university resource people to ensure its progress. Opportunities itself is increasingly seen as a valuable community member. It has helped overcome a longstanding perception that the area's cross-municipal and regional politics are impenetrable. There is now greater recognition of the importance of developing a shared subsidy approach that can be uniformly applied across the Waterloo Region.

The work on recreation has attracted participation from the arts community. Traditionally viewed as separate from recreation, arts groups in the Region are also interested in joining the drive to increase access for children and youth.

Opportunities Waterloo Region is currently working to secure funds to hire a dedicated staff person to continue the arts and recreation access work. If successful, it will focus on increasing the number of community stakeholders involved in the issue – businesses, sports groups, injury prevention and mental health organizations. Plans also include approaching Recreation Ontario in order to influence recreation-specific policy development.

Opportunities' long-range dream is to engage and inspire private funding support in order to subsidize access to recreation and the arts. In this way, no child or youth would have to pay and everyone would get to play.

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Endnote

1. Opportunities Waterloo Region instituted structured lunchtime Community Conversation events in 2002 as a way to stimulate thought and action aimed at poverty reduction. The September 26, 2006, conversation entitled "Access to Recreation for All Youth" featured Professors Troy Glover (University of Waterloo) and Gina Browne (McMaster University). <http://www.owr.ca/history%20of%20ccs%20events.htm>

References

Browne, G. (2002). "Making the Case for Youth Recreation." *Ideas that Matter*, 2(3): 3-8.

Wells, M.S. and S. Arthur-Banning. (2008). "The Logic of Youth Development: Constructing a Logic Model of Youth Development through Sport." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 26(2), Summer, pp.189-202.

Weston, P. (2008). *Access to Recreation for all Youth in Waterloo Region: Environmental Scan of Recreation and Leisure Opportunity for Youth*. Waterloo: Opportunities Waterloo Region. http://www.owr.ca/ARAY_FINAL.pdf

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