

**Nurturing Neighbourhoods: Parent Outreach Worker Program
Guelph, Ontario**

Evaluation Report: November 2014

Executive Summary

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For

Guelph Community Health Centre,
Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health,
Family & Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington County,
and all program partners and stakeholders

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Executive Summary

The "Parent Outreach Worker Program" (POW program) aims to identify, reach out to, and assist families with children who may be isolated or otherwise struggling by providing them with increased access to services and support. The POW program is currently being piloted in two priority neighbourhoods of Guelph, Ontario: Brant Avenue and Two Rivers. The POW program is part of a cross-sectoral, community-based initiative grounded in the philosophies and principles related to the social determinants of health, health equity, and early help in child welfare.

This report details the findings of an evaluation that was conducted to determine whether the POW program is being delivered as planned and the extent to which it is achieving its intended outcomes. Evidence used for the evaluation included program implementation data inputted by the Parent Outreach Workers (POWs) and a series of interviews and focus groups conducted with program stakeholders including the POWs, parents who use the POW program, and a variety of associated service providers and community resource people. This evidence indicates very clearly that the Parent Outreach Worker program is achieving results.

In particular, the program implementation data show that the program is reaching its priority population, including many low-income, single-parent-headed families with young children, who may also be socially isolated. In its first full year, from April 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014, the POWs had an ongoing working relationship with 111 registered clients (families) (48 in Brant Avenue; 63 in Two Rivers), and more than 45 anonymous (non-registered) families as well.

Impact Pathways

The interviews with parents, parent outreach workers and community resource people provided information about how the POW program operates and revealed evidence of progress toward intended outcomes. "Impact pathways" were established to describe the "how" and the "what" of Parent Outreach Workers' work with parents and children. These impact pathways are the major strategies that the POWs use in their work with families that appear to be central to achieving the intended outcomes of the program and reinforcing the program's impacts. The evaluation data uncovered three primary, inter-related themes in what POWs do that generate and reinforce their impact.

1. **Build relationships:** Relationships are built and strengthened through the trust, safety and comfort parents feel when working with the POW; through the sense parents have that they are not being judged; through gentle encouragement from the POWs; by the

In the words of a child protection social worker:

"I think the one worker that I worked with, she's great at building relationships, which is the foundation to be able to work with so many people. The people that I've connected her with have praised her and said they love her. It would be a huge detriment, especially to this one family, for us to lose that support in the community – absolutely."

ability of POWs to make people feel noticed; by the local nature of the outreach – that POWs are visible and perceived as accessible, and available; and through a holistic understanding of the community and the people who live there.

2. ***Provide support:*** Parent Outreach Workers provide emotional support as a listening ear or someone to vent to about a difficult day. They provide directed support to overcome specific barriers to well-being or to help a parent address a specific issue or need in the life of her family. Parenting support includes sharing parenting tips and strategies, acting as an entry point to parenting supports and services and supporting parents to develop skills. POWs also help parents develop other concrete skills by supporting employment, education and personal development. Lastly they support children’s healthy development by facilitating parents’ and children’s access to food, recreational activities and other services and supports, identifying and addressing program and service gaps, providing emotional support to children in need, and supporting or reinforcing positive messages parents are trying to pass on to their children.
3. ***Connect parents and families to others:*** POWs connect parents with services, with other parents and with their community. They do this by providing information about and helping parents to navigate the system of services and support; by creating and facilitating opportunities for parents to connect with each other and their community; and by providing support and practical assistance for parents to make necessary connections.

In the words of a child protection social worker:

"For families [who are struggling], there is a lot of support from the Parent Outreach Worker. They bring food, take people to appointments, to the doctor, and help with medical needs. I have seen them help a client get their toddler into a program that was really needed. We can only visit our clients about once a month, so the Parent Outreach Worker is providing so much more than that. They help with the little things and more the day to day. That might not sound like a lot, but it really puts a spark of faith in the people that there is someone there to support them. It lets them know that there are other community resources for them that they can rely on."

The three impact pathways reinforce each other and positive outcomes for parents and children come from movement along all three impact pathways together. Building relationships is at the centre of this process, as it both reinforces and is reinforced by the other two pathways. Strong relationships are needed to support and effectively connect people; and supporting and connecting people, conversely, strengthens relationships.

Together, these three pathways have led to evidence of significant impact for the parents accessing the Parent Outreach Worker Program.

Outcomes and Effectiveness

The evaluation evidence shows that the POWs have been effective in creating new social ties that strengthen social capital and build informal supports around the parents who access the program. The POWs are supporting parents to engage in mutual aid with their neighbours, and

awareness and use of formal supports has increased. Although early in the program's implementation, considerable evidence exists that the POW program directly provides or connects families to "early support" or to needed support in a timely manner, and that it plays a role in increasing protective factors, supporting safety planning and prevention in a child welfare context, and linking families to early assessments.

Parent Outreach Workers most certainly play a strong role in assisting families to access their basic needs, including healthy food and shelter. Early evidence also suggests that progress is being made toward the following long-term outcomes: families are empowered to meet their needs; accessibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness of formalized services is increased; and neighbourhoods are stronger, safer and more resilient. More time will need to pass and more research needs to be done to truly understand the level of impact in these last three areas.

The research literature provides additional confidence in the design and approaches of the POW program, adding weight to the findings of this evaluation. Characteristics of effective outreach programs describe a targeted, multi-service, and voluntary (not mandated) approach that, like the POW program, is grounded in the local context with activities that take place where people naturally congregate. The literature affirms the importance given by the POWs to the building of trusting relationships, the creation of "networks of supports" for families, and the provision of practical supports, as well as to the specific techniques the POWs use to find clients. Many of the characteristics, skills and activities that define the Parent Outreach Worker Program directly align with these best practices outlined in the literature.

Although calculating the cost-benefit ratio of the POW program in concrete dollars is beyond the scope of this current evaluation, cost-benefit calculations related to social determinants of health and to similar initiatives, combined with estimates of the benefits of investments in early child development, suggest that this program is a sound social investment.

Conclusions

The findings from this evaluation suggest that the Parent Outreach Worker Program is highly *relevant* (appropriate to the context and to demonstrated needs), *effective* (making progress toward the program's intended outcomes), and that it represents considerable potential for cost savings through efficiencies it generates in the formalized health and social services systems and by lessening the long-term costs of social vulnerability. Moreover, many of the benefits the POW program is generating for priority families now will have a *permanent or sustained effect*.

At the same time, data gathered for this evaluation leave many questions unanswered. The data provide few specifics about the quantitative impact of the program and we cannot say with certainty that it is evenly benefiting all priority families in the neighbourhoods. Even with these data limitations, nonetheless, it is clear to us that the POW program occupies an important gap that exists in marginalized communities between the formal service sector, the informal community sector, and the families most in need of support, and that it is generating very significant outcomes for priority families as direct supports and as intermediaries between those families and the community resources they need.

Recommendations

The findings and conclusions from this evaluation lead to the following recommendations:

1. Continue the POW Program with possible expansion to other target neighbourhoods in Guelph.
2. Secure new commitments of funding to ensure the sustainability of the program.
3. The importance of POW activities should continue to be recognized in program planning, job descriptions and resource allocation decision-making.
4. Recruitment and training for future POW positions should include an intentional focus on relationship-building skills, effective communication, an understanding of community processes, experience in community-based practice approaches; as well as clinical assessment, intervention skills, and familiarity with available services and supports.
5. The characteristics of the POW program's target populations should be reviewed and clearly defined in program documentation for future reference.
6. Key program stakeholders should be involved in a review of the program's outcome objectives and overall theory of change to ensure a shared vision for the program and to keep program planning, data tracking, implementation and evaluation focused on results that are accurate, relevant and shared by all.
7. Consideration should be given to promoting the program across key service agencies, with clear communication on the specific roles and functions of the program.
8. The possibility of having POWs administer child development and wellbeing screening tools should be explored as a means of extending early screening and assessment to more vulnerable children, and as a base of data for measuring program outcomes and population well-being in the target neighbourhoods.
9. Data tracking should be enhanced and further research continued to strengthen the evidence base for the ongoing and future assessment of the effectiveness of the program; including a more detailed means of tracking families.
10. Access to descriptive data on the families using the POW program should be improved to strengthen the program's claim that it is reaching priority families.
11. A survey of anonymous users of the POW program should be considered as a next step in the evaluation.
12. Continue the development of monitoring and evaluation practices, and the engagement of research partnerships for longer-term, neighbourhood-level impact studies.
13. As a step toward this longer-term program of research, protocols and agreements should be established so that relevant data already being gathered by the various service systems can be accessed and used to track outcomes at the neighbourhood-level.