

From Neighbourhood to Community

Health and Social Supports North of the Danforth

Denise Lamanna, South Riverdale Community Health Centre

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

The environments in which we live and the opportunities offered to us affect our health and our life expectancy. The significance of social determinants of health has been widely documented, and is a better group of predictors for life outcomes than almost anything done at an individual level. The distribution of income, access to education, affordable housing and employment opportunities, as well as the degree of social cohesion within communities, are each strong predictors of health in the population.

Increasingly, researchers are also finding that these opportunities are tied to geography, and so place-based interventions have gained increased focus. Canadians are coming to understand that where one is born and where one lives deeply affects life chances. This causal relationship between social and economic resources and health status disaffirms Canada's egalitarian values. The analysis of health and social needs of the NODA neighbourhood has been undertaken to explore these dynamics as part of the collective effort to remedy socioeconomically-linked disparities of health.

THE NODA NEIGHBOURHOOD & RESEARCH PROJECT

The area north of the Danforth, between Broadview and Donlands, is an overlooked community in need of support. Sometimes called Pape Village, this is an area dominated by aging, private-market, high-rise buildings and outlined with small houses. It has become a settlement area for newcomers, primarily from Eastern Europe and parts of Asia, and a quarter of all families are designated as low-income. Few local community or social services are located within walking distance. Many of the emerg-

ing needs within these blocks of tall towers confirm the same themes identified in United Way's 2011 report, *Vertical Poverty*. It is within this framework that this research was approached.

The neighbourhood coined "NODA" (North of the Danforth) is bound by Broadview Avenue, Donlands Avenue, Mortimer Avenue, and O'Connor Drive. The centre of this neighbourhood, both in its geography and its community, is the Pape Avenue and Cosburn Avenue intersection. The NODA neighbourhood encompasses the City of Toronto neighbourhood Broadview North, but extends east of this as well to include parts of Old East York and Danforth Village-East York.

The identification of a high-need neighbourhood with few health and social services indicates that there are supports needed. However, there was a lack of information as to how service providers and policy makers could provide the most effective supports for the neighbourhood. This project focused on the state of the social determinants of health within the neighbourhood and sheds light on the neighbourhood's priorities and interests, assets, and common barriers to accessing services. The report supports the thoughtful and effective design of services for NODA residents; additionally, the findings and recommendations developed herein have implications for other neighbourhoods struggling with similar housing, infrastructural, and socioeconomic challenges.

KEY FINDINGS

Household Financial Stability: Employment services for adults, employment services for youth, food security programs, and stable housing supports are often run independently from one another, but many residents of NODA experience these challenges as deeply linked. Adults with skilled work experience feel there are few appropriate employment supports in their community. The insufficiency of support for both individuals that are newly housed and those with restricted mobility leaves many without stable housing situations.

Food Security: Food security was an issue for many NODA residents. Many felt that a community garden, if well implemented, would be an activity they would be interested in learning more about. However, most considered this to be a potential hobby rather than a viable method to improve their household's access to healthy, low-cost food. Community kitchens garnered a strong and positive response for their capacity to turn necessary chores into pro-social, healthy activities.

Childcare: The exorbitant fees, lengthy subsidy wait list, inadequate numbers of spaces (particularly for infants), need to re-apply as a child ages, and poor alignment of childcare hours with many parents' hours of work are significant issues, making access to childcare limited for many in the NODA community. When compounded, these barriers to accessing licensed childcare become overwhelming for families.

Child & Youth Programs: The City of Toronto's East York Community Centre (EYCC) is the primary – and nearly the sole – provider of child and youth programs in the NODA neighbourhood. Its children's programs frequently hit maximum capacity and costs were a challenge for many people. Youth felt disengaged in this neighbourhood that provided so little in youth programming.

Primary Healthcare & Dentistry: NODA residents experienced multiple barriers to accessing healthcare services, namely the difficulty in scheduling a timely appointment and the distances required to travel to the physician's office. Many residents utilize walk-in clinics as an accessible alternative, but would prefer easier access to their primary care providers. Dental care is described as a need in the neighbourhood, but this may be more connected to the high cost of dental care and a lack of awareness of Toronto Public Health dental services.

Public Space & Community: There is a noted lack of indoor and outdoor public space for social connections amongst friends, family, and neighbours. Such spaces are vital in cultivating community anywhere, and are even more important for apartment-dense communities where space is at a premium for most residents. Residents are interested in creating a central community space for social gatherings. They are also interested in developing a facilitated, informal skills exchange program where neighbours can teach one another and learn in a collaborative environment.

Barriers to Access: A lack of information, difficulty accessing and affording transportation, caregiving responsibilities, and other financial challenges were identified as significant barriers to being able to access services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been developed in response to the needs and opportunities in the NODA community. However, the greatest and most effective supports must stem from federal and provincial policy shifts. A co-ordinated effort by upper levels of government to scale back income disparities is fundamental to any substantial improvement in public health.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

1. The provision of childcare supports through provincial and federal governments be co-ordinated and scaled up to meet the demand. Though public childcare centres and subsidies are managed municipally, the enormity of the problem necessitates greater involvement from higher levels of government.
2. The provincial government invest in adequate, affordable housing for Torontonians so as to reduce economic, social, and health-related disparities.
 - a. Revitalize the conditions of private-market, high-rise apartment buildings for quality of life in the long-term.
 - b. Implement funding supports that can counter the rising cost of living.
 - c. Promote greater knowledge about tenants' rights and options for enforcing the responsibilities of landlords.

3. Employment Ontario assesses the current framework for funding and managing its agencies. The requirement that employment supports serve the general population rather than offer specialized services may not be an effective approach in a city as large and diverse as Toronto.
 - a. The framework may not be adequately serving the diversity of individuals seeking employment. Youth, internationally-educated immigrants, and people with professional work experience are underserved by this system.
 - b. While the development of job-seeking skills is a necessary component, an increased focus on directly connecting job-ready individuals with employers would be valuable.
4. Community agencies target youth-specific programming within NODA. There is a need to support youth's personal development and capacity to make constructive contributions to their communities. This includes opportunities to further education and employment, as well as physical and mental health.
 - a. The linkage of youth programming to the availability of youth-friendly spaces and facilities must be recognized in funding models and planning processes.
 - b. Particularly for at-risk and disengaged young people, qualified youth workers are needed to foster these connections and support positive life choices.
5. Provincial government, municipal government and non-governmental funders support wrap-around and place-based support systems, such as the Community Hub model, with appropriate organizational and funding structures.
 - a. This is particularly relevant in underserved neighbourhoods such as NODA, where the deficiency of locally accessible services is a fertile ground in which to introduce a more complete service system.

ACCESS TO SERVICES

6. The provincial government, Toronto Central LHIN and medical community reduce barriers in accessing general practitioners and work to scale back the dependence on walk-in clinics. An improvement in primary care would support both population health and public healthcare expenditures.
 - a. Though South Riverdale Community Health Centre has recently expanded its catchment to include NODA, there is a significant distance between the neighbourhood and the CHC's services. A satellite location within or close to NODA is an option needing consideration.
7. Municipal urban planners reform zoning regulations to support and not restrict community-oriented programming within high-rise apartment buildings.

- a. Zoning by-law 1156-2010 includes regulations for amenity rooms and common spaces within Residential Apartments that can potentially hinder agencies from working in these spaces.
- 8. The Toronto District School Board's Full-Service, Model, and Priority School initiatives are steps in the right direction, and expansion in respect to both number of schools and duration of services within the NODA catchment area.
 - a. Neighbourhood improvement is a long-term process that requires the stable provision of space where service providers and community members can connect.
- 9. Service providers, provincial, and municipal governments create community-based services that integrate with the lives of residents.
 - a. Services can support the accomplishment of necessary life tasks (ex. meal preparation) in ways that are cognizant of residents' lived realities, including pressures of time and finances, and work to improve health, self-efficacy, and social connections.
 - b. Services need to build upon existing community assets and capacity, allowing the neighbourhood to strengthen its social cohesion and promote health through social wellbeing.
- 10. Service providers conceptualize and co-ordinate outreach and communication strategies as an integral component of program design. Processes of service promotion and community connection are vital in creating supportive programs. Collaboration within and between service providers is most effective in the creation of high-quality, organized communication strategies.
 - a. The effective circulation of information sometimes necessitates a reduction in the quantity of information. The phenomenon of "information overload" can decrease the efficacy of communication strategies. The co-ordination of communication strategies within and between agencies may lead to more organized and successful connections.
 - b. Print materials can be posted at accessible locations within the neighbourhood. Bulletin boards equipped with a glass cover might be located within the common spaces of apartment buildings and/or existing community-oriented organizations. Culturally appropriate and multilingual information may be needed.

COMMUNITY ASSETS & SOCIAL CAPITAL

- 11. The City of Toronto recognize and protect public space as a long-term investment in Toronto's quality of life.
 - a. There is a finite supply of public green space in the urban setting. The protection of these spaces requires that appropriate policies be implemented and upheld.
 - b. Walkability in urban and inner suburban neighbourhoods is supportive of public space,

and requires conscientious urban planning.

12. Service providers promote community and civic engagement in the neighbourhood through community-led advocacy and community-oriented program design.
 - a. The NODA neighbourhood is a collective of people that are ready to unite, advocate, and work for community improvement. Involvement of the community in shaping their neighbourhood is a form of empowerment, and organizational support is necessary to facilitate this process.
 - b. With thoughtful design, all programs and services have the potential to contribute to community and civic engagement.
13. The organizations of the NODA Steering Committee are dedicated to ensuring that a team of dedicated individuals and organizations work to support the NODA neighbourhood through the planning and implementation of programming, as well as advocacy for supportive policies.
 - a. Building upon the approach taken by the NODA Advisory Committee and others, it is important to have a diverse collective of educators, healthcare workers, politicians, religious leaders, community support providers, and interested residents.
14. Community organizations develop space-programming partnerships so as to maximize resources and offer accessible programming for residents in their immediate community.
 - a. Space and facilities within the neighbourhood are significant assets, and may be underutilized. An inventory of these spaces is a necessary step in realizing their potential for the community.
 - b. The presence of community-minded property management firms in the NODA neighbourhood is an opportunity to work with and within high-rise apartment buildings. Such programs benefit landlords, tenants, and the neighbourhood as a whole.
15. Community organizations develop and enhance indoor and outdoor spaces for unstructured social gatherings that are welcoming, informal, and regularly available.
 - a. A combination of group-specific (ex. youth, seniors, women) and open hours could better foster its initial promotion and its long-term capacity to reduce social isolation and cultivate community.
 - b. The City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division has the capacity to re-imagine its spaces in a way that meets this demand.