EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *St. James Town (SJT) Initiative*, underway since March 2007, is the Wellesley Institute's largest community-based action research and community capacity building initiative, and its signature project. The *Initiative* is fully funded for five years by the Wellesley Institute and focuses on the social determinants of health (social, physical, and economic conditions) in the North St. James Town neighbourhood in Toronto and examines whether these factors have a differential effect on the health and wellbeing of newcomers of different ethno-racial backgrounds residing in. By design, the *Initiative* is an inclusive process that started its work in the neighbourhood by engaging a disadvantaged population (newcomers) and working with them to explore the health issues they experience through their perceptions. This approach uses community based knowledge to develop meaningful, responsive research to advocate for policies and interventions that reflect the true needs of the people involved, rather than compiling information from a framework of pre-defined problems or a menu of solutions. Equity consideration is central to the *Initiative* as it promotes and moves away from the classic supply model of traditional research to the demand model of inclusive community based inquiry and advocacy.

North St. James Town (SJT) is a central Toronto neighbourhood located in the northeast corner of Toronto's downtown core (Census Tract 0065.00). About 14,666 people (resident estimates are higher at 25-30,000 people) occupy the community's 0.23 km^2 of land, almost all of whom live in 18 aging high-rise apartment buildings (Annex II). Today, with 64,636 people /km^2, SJT is one of the most densely populated areas in Canada, and is home to a very diverse population. About 64% of SJT residents are newcomers; 26% of these arrived in Canada within the last five years, and the majority are visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2006).

St. James Town provides an excellent context for this study because of the diversity of the neighbourhood as well as the challenges and opportunities present within this small geographic area. SJT is a convenient place for newcomers to establish themselves in a new country, as it is within walking distance of schools, community services, stores, and public transit. It is in close proximity to some of the city's wealthiest neighbourhoods, and the downtown core. These positive amenities make it similar to newcomer receiving neighbourhoods in other Canadian city cores. The neighbourhood also faces a number of challenges such as aging infrastructure, limited open space and potential safety concerns. Understanding the intersection between newcomer health and neighbourhood influences in SJT will shed light on neighbourhood influences on newcomers' health in other Canadian immigrant receiving urban neighbourhoods, and on the ways in which newcomers are successfully utilizing their local and community resources to promote their health and well being.

This report reflects the "voices" of SJT newcomer residents through the use of Photo Voice. Photo Voice is a powerful and inclusive methodology because it places power in the hands of study participants from the onset. It enables underrepresented, marginalized people to record and reflect their personal and community's strengths and concerns through photographs which generate dialogue, and share knowledge about important local issues (C. C. Wang et al., 2000). It has been used to engage and empower marginalized individuals and communities who are frequently left out of decision making processes and have often been the subject of research without any involvement in research planning or even knowing the outcomes of the studies. This

has led to understandable resistance to formal research and interventions in marginalized communities. The Photo Voice methodology gives community people a voice. It creates an opportunity to raise collective awareness of issues and challenges that they have experienced. As such, it has proven a particularly effective research approach that can be used to increase knowledge about people's perceptions and behaviours in marginalized communities. At the same time, Photo Voice can create a foundation for social change at the community level (C. C. Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). By building the capacity of participants and by valuing their knowledge and experiences, Photo Voice can be used to advocate for change by promoting a critical dialogue that brings together planners and policymakers through actions such as community forums, exhibits and workshops.

The findings from this study indicate there are a multitude of neighbourhood factors that influence the health and wellbeing of St. James Town residents. Through this process, the positive characteristics of the St. James Town neighbourhood were highlighted as well as the negative features that created barriers to achieving good health and wellbeing. Participants articulated the physical as well as the social environment that contributed to or detracted from their ability to meet their needs. The perception of mental and emotional health appears to be the most sensitive aspect of wellbeing in relation to negative and positive neighbourhood characteristics. As one participant expressed;

> *People are used to meeting and caring for their neighbours and extended families in their countries of origin. In this colder climate they are also greeted with a colder social climate where the physical settings do not give them the same opportunities that they had sitting on their front porches and talking to the community as it flows by their door. In this country, the high-rise apartment space needs to be softened by a lush park setting where people can break down the isolation that the wall of their apartments imposes.... Like the squirrel [an apparently sick squirrel with only three legs captured in the participant's photo] isolated and depressed people deteriorate and develop sickness and become a liability to the health system – at great social cost.*

This quote shows the connections one resident is making between the quality of the social and physical environment and the long term consequences to health and wellbeing.

The neighbourhood physical, economic, cultural and social (SDOH) variables affect individuals' capacity to meet their own needs through the creation of opportunities and or barriers to achieving good physical and mental health and wellbeing in the course of daily life. The concept of health as "the state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not simply a lack of disease" (WHO) was elaborated on in different ways by participants. It encompassed the physical characteristics of the neighbourhood, social networks, expectations of individuals and society in general, values and goals, as well as individual's state of mind. The results indicate that there are many processes at work in St. James Town, factors that interact in a multitude of ways and at different scales that are positively and negatively influencing the health and wellbeing of newcomer residents.

The SJT residents highlighted specific neighbourhood characteristics as well as the complexity of relationships and perceptions that exist for different people through the utilization of these amenities and features. For example, due to its location in downtown Toronto, St. James Town provides good (geographical) access to many of the city resources. However, most participants in this project expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of services and material

goods available in the neighbourhood. Wider research indicates that lower socio-economic households are most likely to be reliant on the services and amenities in the local neighbourhood. Being close to many of the amenities in downtown Toronto is an asset, but many of the residents face financial as well as social constraints (such as language barriers, lack of Canadian work experience and credentials) which dictate the true access individuals have to the resources available within and beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood. Participants highlighted that there is a tremendous need for accessible, affordable and appropriate services that are equitably distributed in the vicinity to meet the needs of this very densely over populated, low income area. Residents expressed frustration; especially concerning the availability, quality and accessibility of public spaces in general and green spaces in particular.

Availability of quality green spaces in the neighbourhood was expressed as one of the many important requirements. Though there are some small parks and green spaces in SJT, often they are not well maintained. The need for quality green spaces was reiterated for several reasons: a) provides an outlet for people of all ages to escape the small spaces and sometimes crowded conditions of the high rise buildings; b) provides a place where newcomers can socialize and meet others; c) provides space for children to play and engage in physical activity; d) access to beautiful spaces relieves stress and creates pride and feelings of wellbeing. Many participants were concerned about safety in the neighbourhood. Inadequate lighting of the streets and public spaces was perceived to promote deviant and criminal activities. Participants emphasized specific areas they did not use at night because of perceived safety risks and were upset over the consistent negative behaviour occurring in certain areas in the neighbourhood. Building maintenance (internal and external), garbage collection and disposal, lack of recycling facilities, lack of safe bicycle storage spaces, non-functional local swimming pools and limited access to quality gymnasium were some of the other challenges facing SJT residents. Participants felt that many of these negative features of St. James Town were contributing to continued stigmatization and the lack of improvement of the area.

The importance of macro-structural factors was an over arching theme, the influence of the broader political, economic and social climate was identified, with many participants feeling powerless to address the problems that were believed to be ingrained in issues beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood. Participants believed that the health inequities in the community were primarily due to the unequal distribution of power, income, goods and services. These results support other research indicating that the root causes of declining health among newcomers lay in the social and structural conditions of the neighbourhood which are related to but not necessarily within the realm of the traditional health system. The relationships between the physical and social variables suggest that the issues need to be addressed through inter-sectoral and cross-government investments and actions. Participants in general believed that there had to be involvement of all levels of government to address the roots issues experienced in the neighbourhood. Coordinated efforts are needed to ensure that the problems that exist are not plastered over and that the root causes are addressed to improve the quality of life of all residents in the neighbourhood and beyond. As one participant eloquently articulated:

> *The goal is to realize that people should not merely exist in St. James Town; rather, it is to discover that they truly yearn, whether they are aware of it or not, to be involved citizens of the place they call home. ...What the community needs is for someone…[to] provide the resources to enhance their capacity to participate in Canadian society in ways that can be seen and felt, because, after all, they do*

strive to be part of their new country and to make meaningful lifelong contributions to Canadian society.

Recommendations

The results from this study indicate that actions are required at multiple levels:

1. Neighbourhood
2. Local government
3. Federal and Provincial Policies

Neighbourhood Level

Participants felt that the community members themselves have a key role to play in addressing some of the identified neighbourhood concerns and challenges. They felt that residents could commit and contribute to a process of continuous improvement of the neighbourhood with appropriate direction and support (technical and financial) to initiate such actions. The importance of building capacity and educating residents was highlighted as an avenue for positive change. Public awareness programs on topics such as: a) individual rights and responsibilities; b) the importance of personal health supports such as hygiene, physical activity and nutrition; c) the importance of recycling and environmental awareness etc. were noted as places to start. Participants emphasized the importance of utilizing existing community resources to strengthen existing networks and to ensure that the programs and opportunities are presented inclusively and are culturally appropriate in a multitude of different languages to meet the needs of this diverse community.

Priorities for local government

Many of the issues identified in the neighbourhood clearly fall under the realm of various municipal departments of the local government. For example, the following recommendations fall under the jurisdiction of the city: a) improving and implementing recycling programs; b) adequate disposal of solid waste management; c) implementing bylaws for adequate building maintenance; d) maintaining green spaces and parks: e) implementing public awareness programs in consultation with the community.

Priorities for Federal and Provincial Governments

Many participants articulated in their stories that addressing many of the social determinants of health that contribute to health and wellbeing of newcomers should be a government priority, and resources should be allocated accordingly. For example, participants highlighted that the quality of life and capacity of newcomers to Canada would be greatly improved with: a) recognition of foreign qualifications; b) supports for the integration of newcomers into the formal labour market; and c) resources for newcomers to acquire required Canadian experience to enter the labour force. All of these factors contributed to newcomers' physical, emotional and mental health and if such policies and programs are not supported by the governments as a priority and resourced appropriately, newcomers to this country will stand little chance of overall success and for maintaining the health advantage that they come with.

The results indicate that health and wellbeing are affected at the neighbourhood level, the majority of which are not within the realm of the health system. To effectively address social determinants of health such as income, living conditions, equitable service availability and

accessibility (to name only a few), inter-sectoral and cross-government actions ranging from the local to the national level are required. Similarly, to effectively address the issue of integration of newcomers in the formal labour market, a multi-sectoral approach, involving cooperation and collaboration across the private and public sectors are required. The voices of people and community are important and efforts should be made to incorporate their views in all phases of program development and program evaluation.