

St. James Town Research into Action: Availability and Access to Health and Social Services

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The St. James Town qualitative study showed that newcomers to St. James Town face a number of barriers relating to the availability, accessibility and cultural acceptability of health and social services. Interviews with service providers in St. James Town highlighted the challenges they faced to meet the needs of a diverse immigrant population, along with funding constraints which affect the availability and kinds of services provided.

The Policy Issue:

- There are limited recreational programs for families in St. James Town.
- Newcomers face language barriers in mainstream services and the difficulty of finding a healthcare provider of the same ethnic background.
- Newcomers have difficulty navigating the health system and access to social services because of a lack of available information to newcomers.
- Newcomer immigrants and Canadian-born residents of SJT experience discrimination in the health facilities.
- Community service providers face funding constraints in trying to meet the needs of the diverse immigrant communities they serve, and have limited flexibility in the design of programs and services to address ethnic and cultural differences in the neighbourhood.

(1) Availability of Mental Health Services

The relationship between poverty and mental health is complex. Immigrants settling in urban settings are encountering increased stressors as a result of adapting to a new environment. A specific challenge for ethnic groups is access to culturally appropriate mental health services. Prioritization of services that target mental health problems of marginalized groups is needed in St. James Town.

“Some family doctors do not accept any new patients. It is very difficult for new immigrants to find a family doctor...Most staff at health centres only speak English.”

(2) Accessibility of Health and Social Services

“Immigrants may not have big problems with physical health, but everyone experience stress which is not possible to avoid. There is relationship between health and stress. The stress is from psychological pressure, not feeling accepted by the society, change in life style, etc.”

• While there are a range of health and social services offered in SJT (settlement services, social assistance, child care, community health centres, and support for seniors) residents complained that wait times and full capacity of patient in-take made the services inaccessible to them.

(3) Acceptability of Health and Social Services

Services need to be culturally appropriate for newcomers with diverse ethnic backgrounds. Residents of SJT reported that language barriers are a major difficulty when seeking healthcare. In addition, SJT residents also felt that they were discriminated against based on their ethnic background by healthcare providers.

(4) Immigrant Women and Health Services

Immigrant women in St. James Town described economic and social challenges in accessing healthy foods and health and social services.

Research into Action: Addressing Access Barriers for Newcomers

- **Community Health Ambassadors** - involves members of specific ethno-cultural or local communities being trained and supported to deliver services to their peers:
 - Health promotion – peer health animators or promoters go out into the community to build awareness around preventing heart disease, stroke, diabetes and other preventable or manageable conditions (e.g., Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Centre *Peer Outreach Worker Program*, and South Riverdale Community Health Centre’s *community action initiatives* involve residents in the planning and delivery of services).
 - System navigation – from simply connecting people to the right referrals through translation and assisting in explaining treatment options, to more active brokering that helps people work through the system to get the care they need.
- **Interpretation Services** - many members of diverse communities face systemic barriers to the health care they need. There are different cultural and ethnic groups primarily of Asian decent living in St. James Town, such as Tamil, Filipino, and Chinese residents.
 - The Ministry and the LHINs need to incorporate a vision of health that addresses the complexity of diversity.
- **Building health equity into the health system** - incorporating equity principles into all health planning and delivery, to better identify health needs of disadvantaged populations, to

“The community is complex, there are lots of special needs in the community...some parents with mental health issues- lower functioning adults with depression; complicated family dynamics....”
(Service provider interview)

identify access barriers, and to design services geared to equity.

- *Health Equity Impact Assessments*, a planning tool that analyzes potential impact of program or policy change on health disparities and/or health disadvantaged populations, have been increasingly used in municipal and community planning.
- **Public Education**
 - Most public education material is presented in printed material and focuses on the formal medical system. Dissemination should incorporate print as well as broadcast and other methods. More information is also needed on alternative or traditional approaches to healthcare and healing.