1. Abstract

Identifying Urban Health Issues among Somali Youth (IUHISY) was a project implemented by Midaynta Association of Somali Service agencies, and made possible by the Wellesley Central Health Corporation through their Enabling Grants initiative. The project's principal aim was to explore pertinent urban health issues within the Somali youth community in Toronto. In so doing, the project sought to ascertain key urban health determinants, particularly those affecting youth access to and participation with vital social services. A founding premise upon which the project was built is that in order to say anything meaningful about youth, their voices need to be heard, recognized, and incorporated into the research process. IUHISY accomplished this through implementing a series of workshops (five in total), in which community members openly expressed their concerns, stories, and ideas. These workshops generated a number of important findings which Midaynta Association will incorporate into both existing youth services, in the form of programmatic recommendations, and large-scale research proposals, in the form of specific research agendas.

2. Project Update

IUHISY's main research activities involved five community workshops pertaining to urban health issues affecting Somali youth. At the helm of the project were the following personnel: a manager responsible for coordinating and overseeing all project activities, a co-investigator serving as a community-based research specialist, and a co-investigator serving as a community researcher and community liaison. During specific workshops, the project also incorporated the leadership of other community representatives. The workshops were designed to allow particular populations within the Somali community to share their concerns, stories, and ideas in a non-intimidating and relaxed environment. To facilitate this, workshops were divided into the following groupings: (1) youth, males-only, (2) youth, females-only, (3) parents / adults, females-only, (4) parents / adults, males and elders only, and (5) mixed age / gender community members. On-going analysis of transcripts from these workshops was used as a means towards identifying urban health research priorities. As illustrated below, the initial workshops covered a broad range of urban health concerns among Somali youth. This was done deliberately, so that the project investigators could then narrow the topical focus in subsequent forums. In the following paragraphs, salient findings from the workshops are provided, along with some commentary relating the content of the workshops to the research process and outcomes proposed in the original Letter of Intent. It is important to note that the views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Wellesley Central Health Corporation.

With the exception of the first workshop (youth, males-only)[1], the formats for the workshops were essentially the same. Co-investigators from the project asked open-ended questions to the groups regarding their perceptions of the most significant issues facing Somali youth in the city. Analysis of transcripts from the workshops demonstrates the following themes to be of significance across the five workshops: education, parenting and the family, and parental participation in the labour market. While they are treated separately in the paragraphs below, it is important to note that these themes are in fact highly inter-related.

The IUHISY project found that education, and education-related issues, is one of the most pressing concerns regarding Somali youth in the city. There was expressed across the discussions a concern over the quality of schools (particularly high schools) within neighborhoods where high numbers of Somali youth reside. Here, both youth and adult participants expressed concerns regarding teacher professionalism, class sizes, and resource allocations. However, there were differences across the workshops *within* these general areas. For example, while youth perceptions of teachers' lack of professionalism largely revolved around in-class teacher behaviors, such as possessing low academic expectations of Somali students and lacking cultural sensitivity, adult perceptions of teachers' lack of professionalism largely had to do with out of class issues, such as an unwillingness to adequately address communication barriers between themselves and Somali parents. In addition to the above issues, both youth and adult participants expressed concerns over (perceived) negative peer pressures within the schools. Again, there were some key differences across the groups. For example, while a participant in the female youth group worried that certain peers might distract their (youth) attention from *academic* pursuits, an adult participant in the mixed workshop worried that certain peers might steer youth away from their *cultural* roots. This is not to say that adults do not have the same concerns as youth regarding this specific issue, but rather that the cultural item surfaced more frequently amongst adult discussants.

Next to education, a second theme which surfaced across the workshops had to do with parenting and the family. Here, discussants pointed to several stress factors, including inadequate housing conditions (too small and not managed well) and unsafe neighborhoods. Yet by far the overriding apprehension in this area had to do with parental presence and role modeling. Here, both youth and adult participants worried about the affects of single-parent households on children, particularly households headed by women. For the youth groups, these affects included increased pressures on children (particularly girls) to take care of the house and the family. Adult participants expanded on this to include the complexities and difficulties related to the necessary employment of Somali women, specifically those women who have not received a great deal of education, and who consequently must work menial jobs. Regarding this, adult discussants stated that such situations negatively impact

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[1] The first workshop for the IUHISY project was conducted on July 23, 2004 with a group of Somali young men (ages approximately 18 – 25) at an after-school program site. The format for this initial workshop was fairly structured. Participants were led through a Powerpoint presentation providing current socio-economic data on the Somali community in Toronto and they were asked for their reactions and input to the information displayed. Topics covered in the Powerpoint presentation included educational attainment rates among Somali youth, youth and adult employment rates, low-income and poverty levels, and general youth risk factors such as systemic racism and intergenerational tension.

the self-esteem of the children of these women to an extent that the children are embarrassed to admit their mothers' occupations.

The presence of a woman-headed household in the Somali community denotes the absence of a father, and this was an issue of utmost concern in all of the workshops. Concerns over the lack of a father figure were voiced most prominently within the youth males-only group, wherein discussants stated that such situations have resulted in a loss of authority at home, as well as an absence of a gender-specific role model. Regarding the latter, male youth discussants further expressed that it is difficult to "replace" biological fathers with other older males.

Fathering and male role-modeling was also an issue which surfaced in discussions regarding parental participation in the labour market. Adult workshop participants expressed several times the affects that de-credentialized labour involvement have had on their children and families. That is, while many Somali immigrants, particularly men, have post-secondary and professional degrees, they have been unable to secure jobs in Canada that match their qualifications. The discussants stated that such situations have "demoralized" the children of these parents, where, similar to the above issue regarding the employment of Somali women, children do not understand why their fathers must work in such jobs. Concomitantly, fathers also suffer anxiety and depression over the same issue. It is interesting to note however, that youth participants also stated that they saw fathers as "fathers first", and as such honored them in their providing for the family, no matter their occupations.

Given the space limitations of this report, it is not possible to include here all of the workshop findings. However, what can be stated is that the workshops satisfied the project's principle objective of exploring pertinent urban health issues within the Somali youth community in Toronto, and further opened the possibility for a beginning inquiry into related social determinants. As indicated above, education and education-related issues, emerged as the most frequently discussed issue in the IUHISY project. The ramifications of this are addressed more fully in **Question 4** below.

3. Reflection

One of the most pressing challenges that this project faced was connecting with participants. There are at least two possible reasons related to this. The first spans across the workshops, and might most succinctly be stated as "problem fatigue." The Somali immigrant community has been present in Toronto for over 15 years, and many community members have had opportunities to voice their problems before. Though the need to address the very specific urban health issues facing Somali youth has never been greater, there nonetheless exists the sense that in the beginning stages of such an effort as IUHISY, a connection between stating problems and finding and providing solutions (particularly in the form of immediate services), is not made. A second reason for some of the disconnect experienced during the project has to do with the workshop formats. This was particularly the case with the first workshop, which the project team eventually concluded was actually hampered vis-à-vis its specific format. The Powerpoint presentation used in this workshop was written within a framework that compared the Somali community to aggregate figures representing *all* other non-majority Toronto ethnic groups, and several youth participants stated that by clustering other communities together and then comparing such aggregates to a singular minority group (Somalis), the presentation neglected to show differences *between* particular communities, and was thus in some ways inherently misleading.

Beyond this particular issue, the IUHISY co-investigators concluded overall that workshop's format had led to a *deductively* as opposed to *inductively*-driven approach to ascertaining youth needs, which was in important ways contrary to the project's originally stated purpose. Working from this, the project team decided for all subsequent workshops to abandon the Powerpoint presentation in favour of an open-ended question format.

A second challenge that the project experienced concerned involving youth in the project's design and implementation. While an initial interview with two youth outreach workers greatly informed the LOI and the workshop question categories, youth could have been more intimately involved as the project progressed (for example; in re-formatting questions and helping to analyze transcripts). This issue will certainly bear on future community-based research projects. However, it is also important to note that this is also an issue connected to extant resources and staff ability, both of which are often stretched in this sector.

4. Next steps

In December of 2004, Midaynta signed on as a collaborator with the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University on a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant application. CURA grants were created by SSHRC to support the creation of community-university alliances in fostering innovative research, training, and the creation of new knowledge areas. CURAs place a strong emphasis on the use of community-based approaches to carrying out research. The proposed program, entitled the Community Coalition for Enhancing Immigrant and Refugee Education, was initiated by community concerns about the experiences of immigrant and refugee children in the Toronto school system, and the need for the professional development of teachers who have these children in the classroom. The proposed program includes a significant school-community linkages component, and is built on the development of specific community-based research activities. The program addresses many of the concerns voiced in the five workshops conducted through the IUHISY project.

5. How might Wellesley Central improve the supports offered to Enabling Award recipients?

Working with WCHC has been very positive. At the inception of the program, the Director of the Community-Based Resource Centre at WCHC met personally with the IUHISY project staff on-site, and was available throughout the project for technical assistance. The project co-investigators and an additional Midaynta staff person also attended the CBR 301 workshop (Delivering on the Promise: Building Community and Affecting Policy through Community-Based Research), the information from which will undoubtedly be helpful for future projects. Finally, as one of the co-investigators (the community-based research specialist) was involved in the creation of the WCHC *e-library*, he was able to share pertinent literature with project staff.

With regard to suggested future support activities, it would be beneficial to meet and learn from other Enabling Award recipients. In this regard, it is suggested that WCHC perhaps organize an end-of-the-program year forum, where grant recipients could be given opportunities to present on their research and to field questions from the larger network of community-based researchers in the city.